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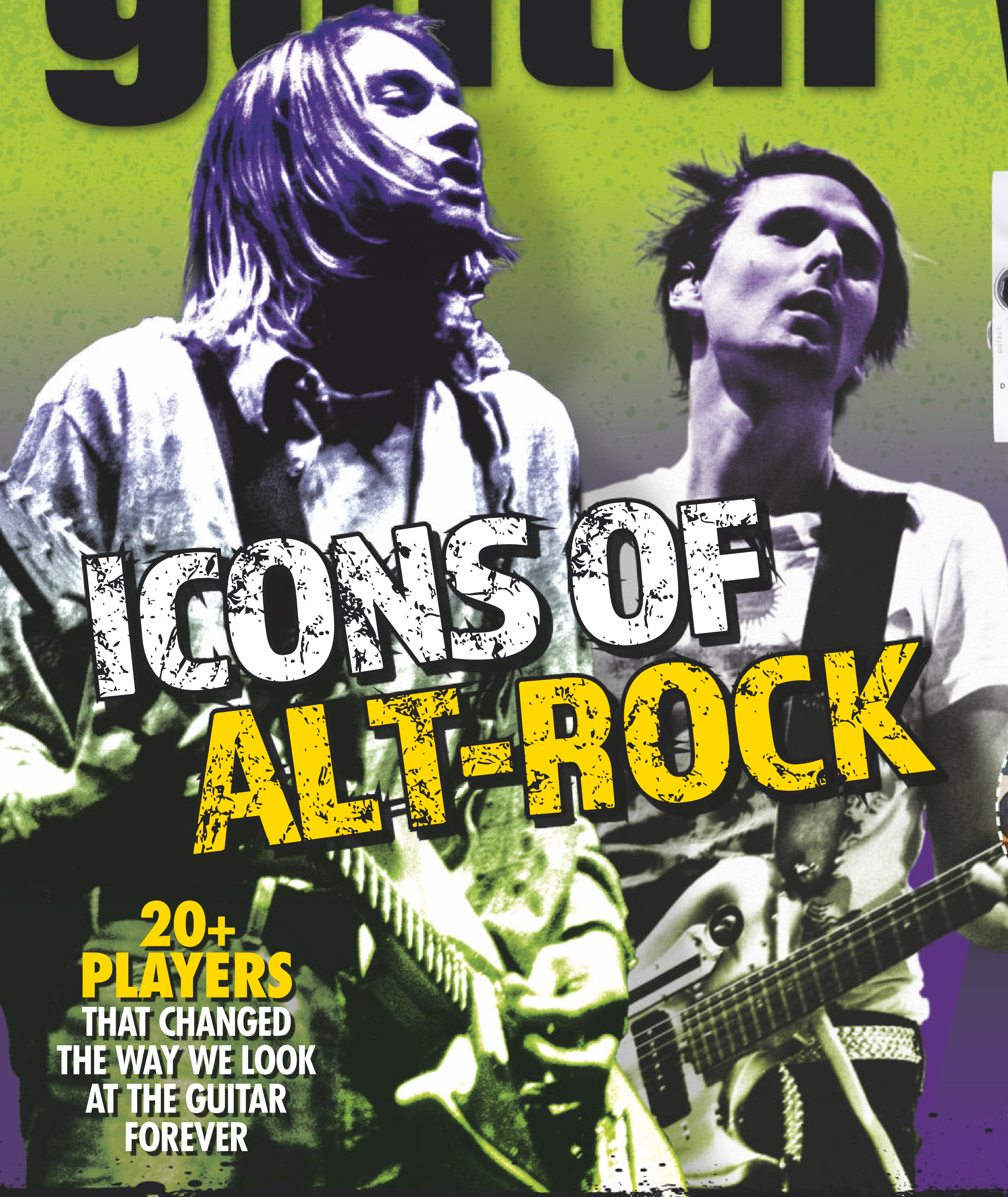

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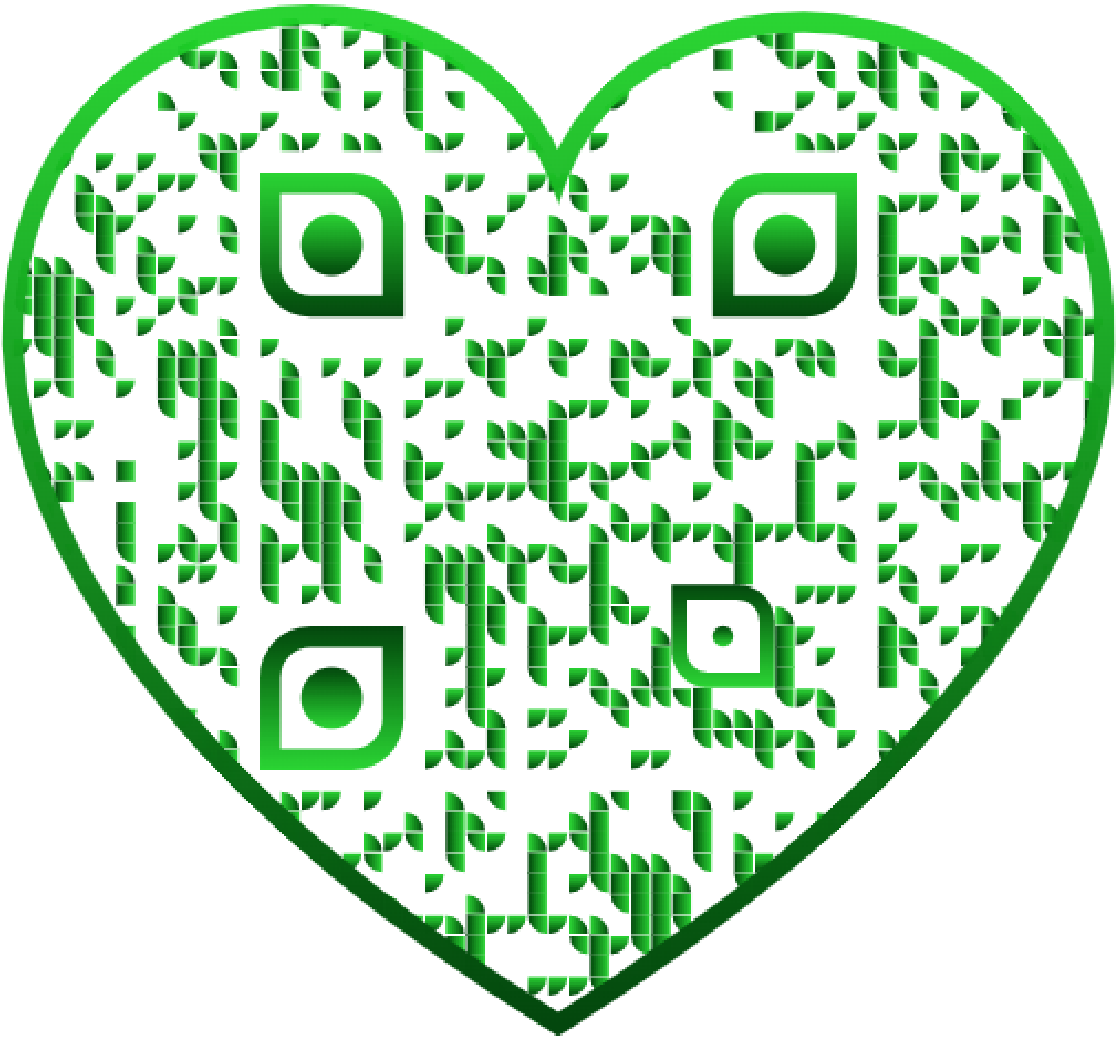

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LAMB OF GOD + BODY COUNT COLLAB ON THE WAY (MAYBE)

Lamb Of God are currently working on new music, and are reportedly collaborating with Ice-T-fronted heavy metal outfit Body Count. In a new photo posted to the latter group's Instagram page (see above), Lamb Of God frontman Randy Blythe can be seen with guitarists Ernie C and Juan Garcia.

The post's accompanying caption reads: "When your friend Randy Blythe invites you to do back up vocals on brand-new Lamb of God material... you show up and support." It adds that the Virginia metallers' new music is "slamming".

The nature of Lamb Of God's new material is yet to be revealed, though they are reportedly working again with longtime producer Josh Wilbur, who has produced every Lamb Of God album since 2009's *Wrath*. Their time in the studio won't last long, though, as the band are set to commence the second leg of their co-headline tour with Megadeth – dubbed 'Metal Tour Of The Year' – in early April.

Lamb Of God have remained active since the release of their latest album, 2020's self-titled effort. The year after it dropped, the band issued a deluxe edition, sharing two new previously unreleased songs – 'Ghost Shaped People' and 'Hyperthermic / Accelerate' – as well as live versions of its ten core tracks.

Words by Sam Roche

GIBSON DROPS MINI-DOC ON SISTER ROSETTA THARPE

Though recognition of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's enormous role in shaping blues and rock guitar playing has increased in recent years, she's still all too often overlooked in discussions of rock 'n' roll's most influential pioneers. However, a newly released mini-documentary from Gibson – *Shout, Sister, Shout! Sister Rosetta Tharpe* – seeks to help change that.

Narrated by Celisse – best known for her guitar work with Lizzo – and featuring Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter/guitarist Amythyst Kiah, the film discusses how Tharpe blended the passion and spirituality of the gospel she was raised on with fierce electric guitar playing, which – with its high-volume power, aggression and virtuosity – was whole decades ahead of its time.

The nine-minute film also touches on Tharpe's 1951 wedding ceremony at Washington, DC's Griffith Stadium. Held before 25,000 paying customers, the ceremony was followed by a live performance that predated The Beatles' American stadium tours by over a decade, and Elvis Presley's scandalously raucous *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance by five years. Needless to say, this is one mini-doc worth checking out.

Words by Jackson Maxwell

MOOER LAUNCHES BLUETOOTH-ED GTRS PTNR AMP

After launching the GTRS Intelligent Guitar – a DSP-equipped, all-in-one digital six-string – last year, Mooer have now announced the GTRS PTNR: a lightweight, ultra-compact guitar amp connectible via Bluetooth.

Offering five watts of power, the GTRS PTNR features a 2.2-inch speaker, with a vibrating diaphragm that's tuned for bass frequencies, promising a "great" sound despite its tiny form factor. Additionally, the amp features an onboard 2000-mAh battery – rechargeable, of course – which boasts up to seven hours of on-the-go usage, and is charged using the same USB-C specifications as the GTRS Intelligent Guitar. The amp also sports a quarter-inch input jack for regular wired connection.

Words by Sam Roche

AUSTRALIAN guitar™

#147

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Photo: Kirty Phillips

CHRISTOS ATHANASIAS

HAILS FROM MELBOURNE, VIC
PLAYS IN DEVIL ELECTRIC **AND** THE UGLY KINGS
SOUNDS LIKE FACE-PUNCHING ROCK 'N' ROLL
LATEST DROP *GODLESS* (DEVIL ELECTRIC LP OUT NOW INDEPENDENTLY)

What's your current go-to guitar?
When it comes to Devil Electric live, I've been using the most excellent Guild Polara S-100. It plays brilliantly from the get-go and sounds unreal; it has excellent tone response and sounds fat and tight, especially when I'm playing heavy, chugging riffs. When it comes to The Ugly Kings, I've been religiously using a sunburst Hagstrom Viking Deluxe. This has been customised with gold hardware, TV Jones pickups and an original Bigsby. This was literally the first project where I created something unique, using what the makers intended but adding a Christos flavour. It's a super versatile guitar, and the neck of the Hagstrom is a work of art – super smooth and super easy to play with.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?
Throughout my teen years I was a massive Metallica and Iron Maiden fan, and it was in high school in Greece that three friends and I decided to form a band – before any of us knew how to play any instruments. With inspiration from Sabbath, Metallica and Maiden, of course I said I wanted to be the guitarist. I believe I took about four guitar lessons before I said to myself, "I am now ready to write some riffs." And so I did. As it turns out, those were the only four guitar lessons I took in my life. Then we moved to Australia and I was just jamming in my room, trying to work things out based on how it sounded and without any real technical guitar knowledge.

What inspires you as a player?
Tony Iommi, Jack White and Tom Morello. All three pushed the envelope of guitar playing. All three had uniquely different styles, but I believe also share one common thing: clarity. You can clearly follow and remember their riffs and their songwriting. You can instantly know a riff played by them. I love that. And that is exactly what I try to bring to the table when I play the guitar. The main thing is clarity of melody and songwriting, despite the amount of fuzz, octaves and drive I stack on my guitar sound.

Are you much of a gear nerd?
Absolutely! I love Fender and Vox Amps. Recently, I've been mostly using two Fender Hot Rods. I split the signal on the way to my chain, so my first pedal is my Lehle Splitter, and then I break out two different chains of effects that run independently to the two amps. My favourite drive pedals are the T-Rex Mudhoney, Voodoo Lab Sparkle Drive, EarthQuaker Cloven Hoof Fuzz, Visual Sound Angry Fuzz and the almighty Gamechanger Audio Third Man Plasma Coil. Favourite octave pedals are the one and only Electro-Harmonix POG, the EarthQuaker Bit Commander synth, and of course the Digitech Whammy. I also love the delay and tremolo pedals that Guyatone makes.

What would your signature model look like?
As a matter of fact, I already have one! It's called The Devil King, made by Mantra Guitar Co, and there's only one in the world. It's very special to me! Made to the exact spec requested. It was inspired by BB King's Lucille Guitar – ES-335 shape, no F holes, matte black, gold trim and hardware, with one almighty TV Jones humbucker on the bridge. No neck position pickup cavity either. It's a beast of a guitar that I have mostly used for Devil Electric, but do use it sometimes for The Ugly Kings as well. It's definitely got a mean and meaty sound, and I use it all the time for recording.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive...
It has to be the classy and evil Tony Iommi. I would be jamming with the Hand Of Doom, and that would be a dream come true for sure. The song has to be 'War Pigs', honouring the song that blew my mind when I was a kid.

Photo: She Is Aphrodite

DEENA LYNCH

HAILS FROM BRISBANE, QLD
PLAYS SOLO (AS JAGUAR JONZE)
SOUNDS LIKE SMOKY, SWAGGERING COWPERSON-POP
LATEST DROP "LITTLE FIRES" (SINGLE OUT NOW VIA NETTWERK)

What's your current go-to guitar?
My go-to electric guitar is currently a 2009 Fender American Standard Telecaster with matching headstock in Daphne Blue. It's in all of our recordings, and for some reason, no matter what effect or amp we put it through, she shines and cuts through with how we envisioned the sound for the song. I'm not one to have a huge collection of electric guitars (money, cough cough) but I knew that if I wanted to step my game up, I was going to have to take a leap on buying something nicer. My fans helped me name her Azul.

All of my songwriting happens on an acoustic guitar that I made from scratch myself. His name is Dingo, and he's mostly made of everything Queensland. I refused to use CNC lasers for any of the inlays, so I sawed and chiseled everything by hand. I wanted it to be made from the labour of my love, with all of its imperfections. Huge thank you to Hancock Guitars, who are expert luthiers and guided me through my three months of slowly building Dingo. My Martin and Taylor don't even stack up in sound. Dingo is gorgeous and was named after my half-dingo dog Simba, who was with me the whole time as I built the guitar.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?
I got my very first guitar when I was studying Engineering at Melbourne University, and had no interest in pursuing music. My close friend passed away and grief struck me really hard. I was walking home from classes one day and stumbled on a garage sale. This Ibanez acoustic was sitting there and I just had this urge to buy it and learn how to play it – except I never really learned how to play guitar. I started writing songs as a cathartic way to process the emotions, grief and trauma that I found difficult to express verbally.

What inspires you as a player?
I'm self-taught and use guitar as a vehicle for singing, songwriting and expression, so I only ever learn what I need to do at a minimum. In the band and onstage, I am the rhythm guitarist, and I really think how I play as a rhythm guitarist came out of my humble beginnings with the acoustic guitar. But I don't really know what influences shaped that. Melodically, I think I am so influenced by Western movie soundtracks and how guitar is used so purposefully in arrangements. People always say that I've got gunslinging guitar parts in my music, and I think that comes from my cowboy dad who showed me a lot of country and Western music growing up.

Do you have any 'white whales'?
I'll take this opportunity to advertise that I have forever wanted a Zvex Fuzz Factory, but refuse to get anything other than the hand-painted Fuzz Factory 7 with the Maneki Neko cat on it.

What would your signature model look like?
Most likely a Fender Telecaster signature model. It needs to be a piece of art that holds attention in a room without force or loudness. She's classy, minimal, timeless and unique. She has an interesting body reminiscent of the past, but pushing for a future, with subtle changes in shape to accommodate better for all bodies. She has an Australian rosewood or maple fretboard with a 7.25-inch radius, matching headstocks with the body, locking tuners, and P-90 soapbar single-coil pickups in the neck and bridge, with a Bigsby tremolo so we can bend and warp with all our gunslinging, cowperson intent.

She's made in Japan with Japanese technology and precision – like me! All parts of her must all be sourced sustainably and ethically. She comes in bold colours of yellow, red and black (this might change) with contrasting pickguards and elements reminiscent of the Jaguar Jonze world. The back will have a graphic with a short message from me to remind players what they're doing this for, and be numbered as a limited edition with each guitar having its own identity.

Photo: Mikey Conlon

JOE MUNGOVAN

HAILS FROM ILLAWARRA, NSW
PLAYS SOLO
SOUNDS LIKE GROOVE-INFLECTED INDIE-POP
LATEST DROP *A FLOWER IN THE WEEDS* (LP OUT NOW INDEPENDENTLY)

What's your current go-to guitar?
At the moment I'm playing a Fender American Professional II Stratocaster. I purchased it last year and haven't put it down since. I love the versatility and feel of this guitar.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?
I started out as a drummer, but at the age of 13 I had a pretty hectic skateboard accident that left me in a wheelchair for a couple of months. Without the use of my legs I couldn't play my kit anymore, so I turned to the guitar. I taught myself how to play by watching *Rage* and copying their finger positions. I strummed away for years on the guitar that my dad had lying around the house, which was a beautiful, custom-made nylon-string guitar – I still use this guitar to record on!

What inspires you as a player?
As someone who learned the drums from a young age, I will always be influenced by rhythm. A lot of my songs use quite a few guitar tracks in different polyrhythms. Lately, I've been listening to a lot of Khruangbin, The War On Drugs, Unknown Mortal Orchestra and Leif Vollebekk, all of whom use the guitar completely differently and in such interesting ways.

Are you much of a gear nerd?
I wouldn't say I'm too much of a gear nerd, just more of a plug-in-and-play guy. I recently picked up a secondhand Reverend Manta Ray that has a beautiful, warm, deep tone.

Do you have any 'white whales'?
A Fender Jaguar (American Original '60s) would be a nice addition!

What would your signature model look like?
I'd love to have Andy at T-Guitars whip me up a custom semi-hollowbody with a couple of humbuckers.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive...
I'd love to play 'Strangest Thing' with The War On Drugs.

Photo: Press/Supplied

SAMUEL TYE

HAILS FROM PERTH, WA
PLAYS IN THE FAIM
SOUNDS LIKE VICIOUSLY INFECTIOUS BUBBLEGUM-ROCK
LATEST DROP "THE HILLS" (SINGLE OUT NOW VIA BMG)

What's your current go-to guitar?
My current go-to would have to be my Nash T63. I moved to Melbourne about two years ago and decided to scope out the music stores here. I ended up walking into a store and picked up a Nash, played it for about 20 minutes and loved the way it sounded, but wasn't a fan of the way it looked. Anyway, I told myself to get over it, and it didn't really matter as long as it sounded and played great. So I went to the counter and told the guy that I loved everything about it apart from its look, and as he was about to scan it, he said they have another Nash, which was one of the best to come through the store. I ended up loving the sound and feel of the other one more – and liked the look – so I ended up going with that one. To this day, I'm not sure if the guy was just giving me his sales talk, but I love the guitar and the way it plays either way.

How did you initially fall in love with the instrument?
Honestly, this probably isn't the best thing to say for an interview about guitars, but I'm not sure if I really fell in love with it – it just happened. I remember wanting to perform as a kid, and my dad had guitars lying around, so I think I naturally gravitated towards it. My love for guitar has definitely grown over time, but at first, I think it was just the only thing available to me. My first guitar was an Ibanez SA series guitar, and I just wanted it because I thought it looked cool at the time.

What inspires you as a player?
I feel like my influences for guitar don't come from guitarists. I like sounds in general, and love to play around with effects and attempt to make my guitar not sound like a guitar. A few of the guitarists I do admire are Ruban Nielson, Tom Morello and Andy Summers, but they don't necessarily bleed into my playing. I more just admire them from afar.

Are you much of a gear nerd?
My gear "nerdiness" has grown over the last couple of years, and I have an addiction to collecting pedals. To be honest, my favourite piece of gear is constantly changing. I get pretty excited about something quickly, and lose interest just as fast, so I'm constantly sifting through YouTube videos to find what to invest in next. At the moment, my favourite piece of gear would have to be my Walrus Audio ARP-87 delay or my EQD Sea Machine. I also spend a lot of time producing tracks, so I get nerdy about plugins.

Do you have any 'white whales'?
Honestly, anything and everything from Chase Bliss Audio is on the list, and I would like to get an original Roland JC-120 at some point. Unrelated to guitar, I've been getting into synths, and I'm getting tempted to invest in a Roland Juno-106.

What would your signature model look like?
I think it would be a solidbody, maple medium C-shape neck, Olympic white guitar and pickguard, with the same body shape as the guitar I used in our 'Ease My Mind' music video (an Italia Modena Semitone). Pickups would be Lollar Vintage T neck and bridge with Schaller locking machine heads. Just for fun, I would probably want to install an inbuilt pitch shifter or something.

If you could jam with any guitarist, dead or alive...
I think I'd want to jam with Tom Morello. I like his attitude towards guitar and from what I know about him as a person. I think a lot of me wanting my guitar not to sound like a guitar is inspired by Tom, so I'd love to pick his brain and perhaps play an Audioslave song with him.

ag TOP PICK

PUP

The Unraveling Of PUPTHEBAND

LITTLE DIPPER / COOKING VINYL

After three albums and an EP, fans know what to expect from the Canadian grit-pop overlords in PUP. We expect thick, crunchy riffs slathered in distortion, wailing with nigh-on punishing aplomb. We expect lyrics that make us want to laugh at first, then cry, then laugh again. Above all, we expect *character* – the tongue-in-cheek dorkiness of Stefan Babcock's snarky quips, the loose and lively bite of Steve Sladkowski's shredding, and the kind of steadfast, yet colourful rhythm section only bassist Nestor Chumak and drummer Zack Mykula could hold down. Like we said in our review of 2019's *Morbid Stuff* (see: *Australian Guitar* #132), there's only one band that sounds like PUP, and we like it when they sound like PUP.

This isn't to say PUP should never evolve their sound. After all, it's the steady evolution of their formula that made *Morbid Stuff* their best work yet. *The Unraveling Of PUPTHEBAND* continues that evolution – albeit to inconsistent effect. The sharpest songs on the record are those that build on the quartet's penchant for bright hooks and rhythmic plot twists: 'Matilda', for example, ties gloomy verses to summery bridges, punctuated with a chorus primed for theatre-wide chant-alongs. 'Totally Fine' is an early highlight, with its vicious, tearing riffs paving the way for what is easily the record's most colour-packed chorus.

Alas, there are some major hiccups to address. Though the grand piano balladry and ultra-meta slant of 'Four Chords' sets up for a wealth of grandiose, experimental musicality, there's never any payoff; we're doled glimmers of synths, horns and 808 beats, but these are merely accoutrements tacked onto songs that otherwise feel, at times, a little stale. 'Grim Reaping' could be the best song on the entire record – and one of the best in PUP's whole catalogue – but an overzealous reliance on distortion for the sake of it makes it an almost jarring listen. It feels like *The Unraveling Of PUPTHEBAND* could have been this big, conceptually epic leap into new territory for PUP, but the band got cold feet right at the edge.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of punchy, punky gems to unearth here. LP4 might be PUP's weakest effort, but that's not saying too much when the band are like emo's pizza: even when they're "bad", they're still pretty good.

'TOP PICK' REVIEW: MATT DORIA
ALL OTHER REVIEWS: MARY VARVARIS

ALDOUS HARDING

Warm Chris

4AD / REMOTE CONTROL

Landing as Aldous Harding's fourth album, *Warm Chris* contains delicate piano ballads, acoustic-based blues that chase dreams of having an office in the country ('Tick Tock'), forays into pop and indie-rock, and an unexpected collaboration with Sleaford Mods' Jason Williamson. While much of Warm Chris is undeniably lovely, it's often in one ear and out the other. Meanwhile, the moments of failed experimentalism – see the childlike screeching on 'Leathery Whip', and overly pitched-up singing on the otherwise catchy 'Lawn' – bring down the listening experience. There's nothing wrong with trying new things, of course – it just doesn't work too well in this instance.

BUGS

Cooties

COMMUNITY MUSIC

Bugs' jangly brand of happy emo, drawing on early 2000s pop-punk with an ocker accent, is positively delightful. While their third album, *Cooties*, explores themes like the nasty side of humans driven by capitalism ('Diamonds'), fear of commitment, and self-doubt, they deliver them with bright riffs and sing-along choruses. The band excel at making quirky pop-punk (and songs like the sort-of ballad 'Mars & Venus'), but they're not here with the typical 2000s pop-punk/emo trope of wishing harm on an ex-girlfriend's new partner – nor do they write about women as if we are vessels for their neuroses or "cool girls". Instead, *Cooties* radiates positivity, and Bugs are all the better for it. They're like Australia's answer to Jack's Mannequin, Andrew McMahon In The Wilderness or Microwave circa *Much Love*. What more could you ask for?

GHOST

Impera

LOMA VISTA / CONCORD

Ghost don't shy away from epics, and following the rise and fall of empires, *Impera* is no exception. But despite its lofty ambitions, the album's sound does a disservice to its thematic content. That's ultimately: we're thrilled to hear Bon Jovi's 'Runaway' meet Ghost on 'Spillways', and we enjoy the hell out of it. The musicality is off the charts, and frontman Tobias Forge sells every moment – even when the band veer a bit too goofy on 'Twenties' or too close to hair metal on 'Kaisarion, Darkness At The Heart Of My Love'. Flanked by Klas Åhlund's production and Andy Wallace's mixing prowess, *Impera* delivers Ghost's signature deranged style with a newfound glossy sheen on highlights 'Call Me Little Sunshine' and 'Watcher In The Sky'.

KURT VILE

(Watch My Moves)

VERVE/VIRGIN

Kurt Vile broke out as a solo artist after a four-year stint as The War On Drugs' lead guitarist. But much like their last record, Vile's latest output leaves us wishing we were listening to the old stuff instead. There's nothing memorable or new here; sure, 'Fo Sho' is a groovy, lo-fi distorted-guitar-and-synth number, and 'Say The Word' is like a chill Tom Petty song – they're both cool, but they're the only two tracks that stand out in a sea of plainly downtempo, acoustic tracks. 'Cool Water' is a lesson on how to meander for five minutes. 'Goin' On A Plane Today' would be fun if it didn't resemble an advertisement jingle, and 'Like Exploding Stones' just makes noises for the sake of making noises. Yawn.

WET LEG

S/T

DOMINO

After ten years of friendship, Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers – both of whom sing and play guitar – formed Wet Leg in 2019. Their unashamed cheekiness and magnetic chemistry shines on their eponymous debut – particularly on 'Chaise Longue', a dream debut single. Replete with *Mean Girls* references, the song catapulted Wet Leg to viral stardom, and might just become their career-defining track. 'Angelica' is the perfect indie-rock track, recalling country-pop vibes à la Angel Olsen on *My Woman*. The album also features grunge firecrackers ('Oh No'), blistering kiss-offs to ex-boyfriends ('Wet Dream') and a noise-laden closer ('Too Late Now'). Between all this visceral punk-rock energy, 'Convincing' and 'Supermarket' feel like rehashes – but for a debut LP to be a 10/12? That's pretty damn impressive.

WIDOWSPEAK

The Jacket

CAPTURED TRACKS / REMOTE CONTROL

There aren't many bands as consistent as Widowspeak. They meld sweet, subtle melodies, bluesy folk jams and heavy grunge on *The Jacket*, from the soothing chords of 'While You Wait' to the quirky twang of 'Sleeper'. Hamilton's voice comforts and Thomas' playing delights – the pair shine brightest on 'Everything Is Simple', a track that evokes Ben Howard's 'Oats In The Water' with its ominous, droning riff. The title track isn't quite blues or country, it's somewhere in between, and the blend of keyboards with distorted guitar takes it to the next level. The Jacket is a chill record, a rock 'n' roll album, an escapism record, and the kind of record you'd hear as Buffy hits the Bronze dancefloor with Willow. Who knew a concept album about a fictional band could sound so magical?

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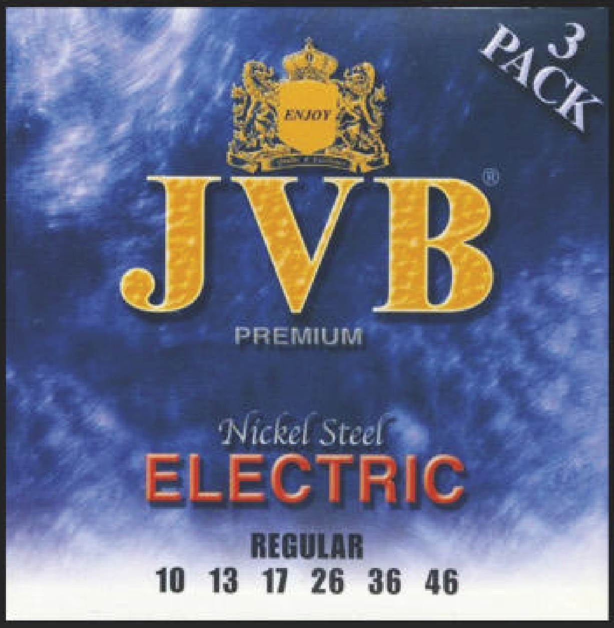

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KNIGHT & DAY FESTIVAL

WHERE
KRYAL CASTLE
BALLARAT, VICTORIA

WHEN
THURSDAY DECEMBER 30TH
AND FRIDAY 31ST, 2021

REVIEW
BRAGG AND
BRITT ANDREWS

PHOTOS
BRITT ANDREWS

It was hard not to feel excited as Kryal Castle came into view, with authentically styled red and blue banners hanging from its dual turrets. This festival has the best metal and hardcore bands Australia has to offer, and it's being held inside a full-size replica of a medieval castle in the middle of country Victoria. A *castle*. This author cannot stress enough how metal it is to walk across a drawbridge to enter a festival – even if the moat was an off-putting, murky green (and probably contained at least 400 unique varieties of bacteria).

With the mercury high and the mood even higher, both **Windwaker** and **The Beautiful Monument** were able to hype up those who braved the heat early. The thrill returning to a music festival was palpable, and the crowd was almost buzzing. Throwing a curveball to the crowd, Windwaker's cover of Britney Spears' 'Toxic' was an early highlight. There were a few tech issues with the mixing, though, so even though the early bands were killing it, it was hard to hear the vocals or lead guitars, which took a bit away from the experience.

As the sun began to set on day one, **Alex Lahey** served up the performance of the weekend. She was definitely a bit out of left field for the lineup, certainly not being as heavy as the rest of the cohort, but she delivered a strong, chilled-out set that was not only well-placed, but incredibly well-received. Lahey's set gave everyone a chance to sit back and appreciate the fact that they were at a damn music festival, despite the world falling apart around us. Her supporting band also had a strong stage presence that instantly inspired good vibes.

Polaris closed out the night with a set that was fit for a king. It cannot be stressed enough how phenomenal this band is to see live – from Jamie Hails' captivating, intense presence, to Ryan Siew's absolutely insane and seemingly effortless shredding, there was nothing to fault about their set. It comes as no surprise that Polaris are one of the fastest-rising heavy bands in Australia.

While the temperature continued to soar on day two, punters had more knowledge of the castle, and were able to pick out spots to rest and grab shade. With all the nooks and crannies the castle offered, we later heard rumour of an air-conditioned room, complete with a vending machine that had $2 cans of soft drink. These whispers were unable to be verified by this reviewer, with the castle not deeming us worthy enough to reveal its secrets. It should be noted, however, that the castle's torture dungeon became of much interest, with the wooden stocks being in a nice, shaded area, and the torture rack becoming a prime spot for naps.

The Chats pulled a surprisingly decent crowd, though their set could, at best, be described as "whelming". While 'Smoko' went off, the rest was neither here nor there, and as each song rolled into the next, the droning, repetitive beats started to lose some audience attention. Fitting for the location, **Void Of Vision** frontman Jack Bergin hit the stage in a chainmail suit, definitely winning the outfit of the festival. He and his crew were tight, heavy and dirty – though that *could* be attributed to the metric tonne of dust kicked up by the numerous circle pits in the gravel-floored jousting arena.

Hellions opened their set with an eruption of confetti, and kept the excitement up throughout by performing their acclaimed 2016 album, *Opera Oblivia*, in full – in spite of a strange miscommunication with a stagehand trying to cut time from their set. Closing out the festival – and the year that was 2021 – were the kings of Australian heavy music, **Parkway Drive**. With a throwback to high school, and frontman Winston McCall telling us to "report to the f***ing pit", 'Boneyards' threw the crowd into a frenzy, before the epic *Reverence* closer 'Chronos' sent the year out with a bang.

It was heartwarming to see a heavy music festival go down so smoothly in 2021. The mood was high throughout the weekend, after what can only be described as a truly hellish year. It's no secret that COVID-19 has decimated both the music and tourism industries, so for the tight-knit fanbase of Australian heavy music, having the ability to bring tourism back to rural Australia – literally booking out every hotel in Ballarat – was an absolute honour.

Tears were shed over the weekend, not only for what's been lost over the past two years, but in sheer anticipation of what's to come... Also, Kryal Castle is *really* cool.

FRESHLY BAKED

RARELY WILL THEIR DEBUT ALBUM MARK A BAND'S REINVENTION. BUT IN **BAKERS EDDY**'S CASE, THAT WAS EXACTLY THE PLAN FOR *LOVE BOREDOM BICYCLES*.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **KANE HIBBERD**.

Debut albums can be a *terrifying* beast to tackle – after all, you only get one chance to make your first full-length record. As such, some bands spend years – decades, even – going out of their way to make the strongest records possible crafting opulent, conceptual epics primed to make musical history. Some bands stick to the bare necessities, focusing on a smaller list of ideas to ensure each one is executed as sharply as possible. And some bands know right off the bat that they'll be late bloomers, so their debut albums are little more than glorified demos – they'll save the real good shit when they've got an audience lined up.

Bakers Eddy are none of those bands. They're a bit paradoxical in their process – they're resoundingly strong songwriters and look at every new track as an opportunity to improve, but they also don't really give a shit about impressing anybody. Their just-released debut album, *Love Boredom Bicycles*, is about exactly that: love, boredom, and bicycles. It's not exactly avant garde, but it's much, much more than something strewn together in a few casual weekends. They prioritise simplicity by searching for a key motif that hits incredibly hard, then framing an entire song around that one idea.

This isn't always the kind of band Bakers Eddy were, either. *Love Boredom Bicycles* saw them retool their musicality, and the ways they approached it, almost entirely; it's less a culmination of everything they'd done until this point, and more an introduction to an altogether new iteration of the band. *Australian Guitar* caught up with frontman Ciarann Babbington (and briefly bassist Ian Spagnolo) to vibe on how it all happened.

What's your philosophy behind writing a f*ing sick guitar hook?**

Oh, it's got to be hot. I love The Hives, and one thing they do really well is progressions – all of their progressions, and their playing style, are so hot and on-the-edge… I think 'Concertina' is a Hives progression, actually – I'm sure I stole it from those guys [*laughs*]. But it's just all downstrokes and it's all really heavy, and that's my favorite thing to do. But then on the other side of that, I like holding simple chords – that are quite dissonant – over the top of melodies that are going all over the place. Like in 'Hi-Vis Baby', in the chorus, all I'm playing there is just one chord, the whole time. And it's sat just below the bass, where it kind of creates this, like, nostalgic swell. I like stuff like that. All of it's got to do with power chords and downstrokes.

I can totally picture myself being at Splendour In The Grass, watching 'Hi-Vis Baby' just soar out across the fields. Do you have any settings or particular moods in mind when you're writing a song?

I don't reckon that was something we intended on when we went into the writing process, but definitely after hearing the mixes – or even after the demos – I would be riding my bike with headphones on, going, "Yeah, that would that would go down really well at The Forum." Or, like, "That would go down really well at Splendour, at the 2pm, 39-degree slot in the tent." I think they'd all sound pretty good in a dive bar – as long as they've got the tick from the dive bar, then it's cool.

Is there a balance you have to hit, between the fun shit and the more serious shit?

We're trying to escape from the whole "lad band" scene. There is a lot of those boisterous, like, "out with the boys" kind of bands, and we noticed ourselves being seen as one of those bands. So I think we intended on trying to escape that [with this record], in a way. Maybe by cleaning up the sound and yelling less – my singing voice changed a lot. But the fun stuff is a big part of [Bakers Eddy], especially with the way we recorded it.

When we recorded drums, for example, all of us made a point of being in the room with Jamie. I was running around the whole time, jumping up and down and throwing shit, and we were all just having a good time. I think that was the most important thing, going into it – the songs need to sound good, but they need to sound like we do live. And that's the kind of band we are live – it's all just a bit chaotic and falling off the edge.

I think this record has a good mix of breeziness and intensity. What were you going for with the musical vibe?

That was completely intentional. Because prior to recording with Oscar [Dawson], we had been running a lot of fuzz – that was what we thought we were going to do with our sound, just make it as fuzzy as possible, and use a lot of open chords as well. But I think we discovered that that wasn't really "us". I think when you chuck so much fuzz on a guitar, you lose a lot of the character that comes through with the pick strokes, and being able to hear the strings twang a little bit when you don't quite hit the fret properly.

We wanted to go for more of a crunchy sound. We're quite high gain-y, high treble-y sounding with our guitars. And heaps of mids – I reckon the mids are where all the fun is, so we crank the mids. And when you do that and you do slop around a bit on the guitar – you're not quite so clean – you hear all the strings twanging in the air, and you can hear how hard you're picking. That was something we all talked about, like, "Alright, we're gonna just clean it up a little bit, but play way harder. And play sloppier almost."

Is it true that you all started this band when you were 12 years old?

We were little babies, yeah. I played drums at the School Of Rock in Wellington, but I got sick of playing drums because I was always behind the guitarist, and the guitarist in our band used to bully me. He was 12 at the time and I was 10, so he was on a bit of a power trip.

You know what a nookie is? He would do that to be before the shows, in front of people, and it was incredibly embarrassing. I was like, "I've had enough of you! I'm going to start my own band, and I'm going to be the guitarist! I'm going to sing!" And Jamie was a really close friend of mine – he used to play the bongos, so I was like, "That's close enough, you can just play the drums. I'll give you my drum kit!" And then the rest is history. And that kid never bullied me again [*laughs*].

So what's it been like to literally grow up together as a band? Did that kind of intrinsic, almost brotherly kind of bond come in clutch when it came to the working on the album?

Babbington: It's helpful, because we can be very honest with each other. We have arguments all the time, but then we apologise and have fun.

Spagnolo: There's a lot of brutally honest truths that come out. Especially in the studio.

Babbington: Which is good! It's better they come out in-studio, while you're tracking the thing, rather than a year later when someone's like, "I didn't like how you spoke to me about that guitar solo." It's like, that's not helpful. I'd rather you just be like, "That's a shit guitar solo, don't do that."

Spagnolo: But yeah, growing up together – especially through the teenage years – was very formative. We we know how to talk to each other, so we *can* be brutally honest. And sometimes it *can* be a bit cruel, but we know how to get across.

Babbington: Usually the things that we're cruel about are extremely petty. I don't think we've ever had a serious argument about anything.

ART IMITATING LIFE

THE WORLD IS MORE F***ED NOW THAN EVER, SO ON ALBUM #3, **TOTALLY UNICORN** ENTER A WHOLE NEW DIMENSION OF MATH-PUNK CALAMITY TO COUNTER IT.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **LUKE HENERY**.

You'll never quite remember your first time seeing Totally Unicorn live – chalk it down to intoxication, or all the crowd-surfers' boots you'll cop to the noggin – but there'll always be a lingering sense that it was one of the best goddamn sets you've ever seen a band play. And you'll be right: infectious is the sheer visceral intensity of frontman Drew Gardner, both vocally and in his movement, thrashing around the stage (and in the crowd) like Satan himself is trying to burst free from his stomach. Mesmerising is Aaron Streatfeild, battering away at his fretboard on grisly, guttural riffs like his strings owe him money – not to say the least about his and drummer Adam Myers' pure disregard for traditional time signatures.

For their third album, *High Spirits//Low Life* – crafted in the time of COVID-19, when the prospects of taking to a stage were no less than dismal – Totally Unicorn took a step back and honed in more on how their songs sounded through headphones, rather than amp stacks. It's something they'd always endeavoured to do, Streatfeild tells *Australian Guitar*, but with more time, more money and more turmoil to mine for great songwriting, they were able to pull it off without a hitch.

Ultimately, *High Spirits//Low Life* is an apt title for the record: it shows the band in their most energised form to date, playing wickedly fun songs about punishingly bleak songs (whether they be personal, political, or somewhere in the middle).

With all the f*ed-up shit going on right now, how did you find the motivation to get back into the studio?**

I mean, we've all gotten so invested in [this band], so we didn't have much of a choice. I mean, it's an expensive process, recording an album. It was hard for me because my head was elsewhere – I had some personal stuff happen halfway through the recording, and it was trick. But I suppose in times like that, having something something to focus on, other than the absolute bin fire that is your life, it helps. It sucks when it finishes, though, because you have to come back to your crushing reality. But y'know, we all do this thing as a labour of love – we're all over 30 and we're still trying to make music, purely because we enjoy doing it. Playing music is one of the best things you can do – especially when you're doing it with your friends.

Do you find that you're able to channel all of those emotions into the music you write?

Yeah, for sure. That's one of the things I always try to give myself some gratitude for – although we don't get to make a living off our music, we've still got our foot in reality, and that can fuel whatever music you make. That's our biggest influence, really. Drew always talks about it in his lyrics – about his day job that he hates – and I do it when I'm writing guitar parts because a lot of the time, that's how I get into my zone: I sit and dwell in whatever I'm dwelling in at the time, and sort of start building some chords from that.

Emotion really determines what kind of music I write; every time I've tried to be like, "I want to do *this* kind of thing," it's turned out shit. So I just stick to whatever my muse is at the time, I suppose, whatever drama is going on, or life issue – which, y'know, I seem to have no shortage of them, so...

I feel like it's not a stretch to say that Totally Unicorn are a gig-centric band, first and foremost. But in a pandemic, when the touring landscape is unpredictable at best, do you have to rethink your approach to songwriting?

Well over the years, we've wanted to try to write more songs that would do us more of a favour in the listening sense. A lot of the songs are great for a live show, when people are drunk and and carrying on – and that certainly works well – but I think we kind of wanted to try something a little more impactful. Writing simple songs is really hard, y'know? Writing a million riffs in a song – that's still difficult, I'm not shitting on that at all, but trying to write a short, concise song is *really* difficult. But that's what we wanted to try to do. We were like, "Alright, we've got our live game up, that's really good – now let's try to lift up the other end, let's do some songs that people want to listen to." We don't always want to be the sad clowns dancing in the pub for everyone's enjoyment.

How do you find that sweet spot with a riff that is f*ed-up brutal, but also melodic and danceable?**

As I've gotten older, I've realised that I don't want to do much of that math-y kind of stuff – mainly because, I don't know, I really love a nice groove, and I love something that makes me want to shake my thing when I'm playing it. It's always a good sign when you can feel it in the room while it's happening. Myer's really good at the math-rock thing, but I think his real strength is coming up with those really nice and sexy grooves. I think 'sexy' is what I wanted to do a bit more of this time around. Who doesn't want to see a bunch of pasty white boys in their thirties trying to be sexy?

Speaking of sexy, what are the secret weapons on your pedalboard right now?

I think last time we spoke, I was complaining about how broke I was all the time. But since then I've stopped drinking, so I'd saved up a bit of money. I also got a better job as well, so I've got a little more cash. So I bought a couple of really cool things. Some of them I didn't use on the record because I got them after we made it, but they all emulate everything on record really well. I've got that 1981 Inventions distortion – I usually use a [ProCo] Rat, but I didn't actually use that on this record.

The 1981 is the perfect Instagram pedal. It looks really cool, but it actually sounds really good as well. So I've got that in the Marshall, and that's great. It's kind of like a Rat but it's not as hairy or wolfy – I can maybe scoop it a little bit and get a bit more chugg out of it. One of the *really* secret ones, which is embedded throughout all the songs on this record, is another hipster pedal: a Montreal Assembly Your And You're. Jimmy [Balderston] – who recorded our last album, *Sorry* – had one, and he was like, "You got to give this thing a go – when it's not on, it just makes noise, and it sounds like someone's tearing paper." And I was just like, "Yep, sign me up."

It has a bit of a HM-2-y thing to it. It's the noisiest thing in the world – as soon as you turn it on, it's just like, *"GRATATATATATATAT!"* – which I think is the thing you probably hear at the end of 'Weekend Warrior'. But it's cool. And paired with a much cleaner tone, it's mad. If you a play it by itself, it hasn't got a whole lot of definition, but with the bass and the drums and then a cleaner guitar over the top of it, it's magical.

THE POWER OF POP

HOW TIME, AMBITION AND TAYLOR SWIFT SHAPED **CAMP COPE**'S STRIKING NEW ALBUM, *RUNNING WITH THE HURRICANE*.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **NICK MCKK**.

Cutting her teeth as a busker playing heartrending emo slow-burners on a weathered acoustic guitar, it was magical to see Georgia Maq blossom into the headstrong bandleader she was destined to become with Camp Cope. Their self-titled debut was a solid introduction, beefing up Maq's lowkey crooners with bold, scene-stealing basslines (courtesy of Kelly-Dawn Hellmrich) and punchy drums (via Sarah 'Thomo' Thompson). Its follow-up, 2018's *How To Socialise And Make Friends*, galvanised the group as a force to be reckoned with, melding their venomous riot grrrl ethos with searing indie-rock motifs.

Though the band have kept quiet over the last four years, their artistry's only continued to grow. Hellmrich launched her own project, Kelso, exploring a different corner of the indie bubble with her 2019 EP *Always A Godmother, Never A God*. That same year, Maq broke out into bubblegum pop with her shimmery, synth-driven solo record *Pleaser*. That experience, making such a startling detour from the style she'd spent over half her years establishing, led the frontwoman to wildly reconsider what's possible with Camp Cope.

So, on the group's long-awaited third album, *Running With The Hurricane*, she and her two ride-or-dies have . Named for Redgum's 1986 classic – just one of its nods to that band's late frontman and Maq's father, Hugh McDonald – it's a truly moving listen, tighter and more accessible yet somehow legions more scopic than their first two records combined. As Maq tells *Australian Guitar*, the new LP is much more than just Camp Cope's third full-length effort, it's the first step on an exciting – and ambitious – new journey for the group.

How would you say this record takes Camp Cope to the next level?

Kelly and Thomo just did what they normally do, which is be amazing at their instruments, and then I just kind of lost my mind with the process. I really wanted to make something that I would like enjoy listening to. Because I feel like the last two records aren't really background music – you listen to them and you get really deep into it – whereas this one, I think, is more listenable. It's more accessible to people. And that was very intentional, because I love pop music. I love folk music and I love country music – that's all I listen to, so I was very influenced by that. And I knew how to get across the sounds that I wanted to get across.

It's still not perfect. There's still things I would change, but I do feel like this is the first step in, hopefully, a new direction. Because I feel like when I was younger, I'd listen to bands just because it was cool to listen to bands, and it was cool to be into bands. But I never really liked bands. I'm the biggest Taylor Swift fan in the world. And I think I was in denial of that for a long time because I was like, "This isn't cool! It's not indie! Everyone knows Taylor Swift, so therefore she can't be cool." But really, I just f***ing love pop music.

Taylor Swift is like the greatest f***ing artist of our generation. I think I took a lot of influence from her because in lockdown, that's when I was, like, *really* getting into Taylor Swift. I was listening to a lot of Florence And The Machine and Jason Isbell, too.

So you guys have welcomed in a new guitarist for the live set, Jennifer Aslett. Did you write these songs knowing you'd have that extra set of hands in the fold?

No, actually, Jenny didn't join the band until after we made the record. There's two guitars on every song – every song has acoustic on it, because I'm really good at acoustic guitar, and I wanted to show that. And there's piano, too, which I couldn't have done if we didn't have someone else playing the other parts. And Jenny is just so f***ing good. I love her. She just makes everything so enjoyable, and she's such an amazing presence – we all have so much chemistry with her.

Do you feel more confident as an artist on this record?

I think my writing skills, and my arrangement and production skills, are really shown off on this record. Because it's like, I like have all these amazing f***ing symphonies in my head, and I've always just struggled with getting them out. But now, after making a little pop record, I know what I'm doing a little more.

After making *Pleaser*, in lockdown in 2020, I made a solo pop record that no-one's ever gonna hear, and I did it all myself – I produced it, engineered it, recorded it… *Everything*, myself. And I think I took a lot of influence from that into Camp Cope, because I was like, "F***, there's so much more that we can do with this!" I also just wanted to challenge myself, with all the piano and the harmonies, and the vocal parts and stuff.

How did your change in headspace come across in the record's thematic slant?

I feel like I'm in a completely different place. I feel like I was very angry for a while, and that anger didn't serve me. It just made me ugly. And I know that a lot of people loved that, but I didn't. I think this record is a lot more authentic – it feels quite revealing, because there's a big theme of desperation in there. It's me just expressing how much I want love, and how much I want to be okay, and how much I want to be powerful.

I still love female rage. I think it's incredible, because no, we're not here to serve men and smile in photos with them. I love female rage. But it's exhausting. I'm at a point in my life where… It's not that I don't care as much, but I'm exhausted by rage, and I just want to lead a f***ing happy, easy life, y'know? I just want to serve my community, I want to be a good person, I want to live my life for others, and I want love.

What was it like working with [producer] Anna Laverty at Sing Sing Studios?

Sing Sing is just such a lux studio. The space is really nice, and they have *two* grand pianos there. I think [Anna and the studio] just added a whole lot more to the vibe. And I, like, *demanded* from Thomo that we have more time. I was like, "We are *not* doing two days. It's stressful, we're gonna make a shit record…" Y'know, I chuck a hissy fit, and then I get what I want – I'm big baby [*laughs*].

So we ended up getting six days. We did three days, and then we waited two weeks – because in that two weeks, I wanted to listen back to everything and *hear things*, and hear how I wanted things to be – and then we did another three days. And so I think this record ended up better because we had the luxury of time, and we had access to more instruments and better equipment.

As a guitarist, were there any new techniques you were keen to explore?

I guess just… Less. I wanted to play a bit less. I was also experimenting with a chorus pedal and a fuzz pedal in certain parts, and really trying to learn how to open up my sound. I also have a beautiful acoustic guitar, and I wanted to play that on every single song because it just sounds f***ing gorgeous. And, when an acoustic guitar and an electric guitar are put together, it really thickens out the sound a bit – I think that's what Camp Cope really needed. I also used a different electric guitar this time; I used to the Jazzmaster really hard, and now I play a Gibson Les Paul Jr. It's a little smaller, and I just love the way it sounds. I love my guitar.

When did you get that?

Before we went to the UK – three years ago? I just bought it off some dude on Marketplace for $1,200. I think it's a 2012 model? It's beautiful.

And the acoustic?

It's a Martin. I don't know what model it is, but it's from 1974 and it was my dad's. That's what I played for 'I've Got You' on *How To Socialise And Make Friends*. There's always a little bit of something from my dad [in the mix] – it's my way of keeping him alive, and keeping our connection strong.

MARCHING ONWARDS

TWO DECADES ON FROM THEIR LAST ALBUM, **MIDNIGHT OIL**'S POIGNANCY HASN'T WAVERED ONE BIT. WE EXPLORE THE ORIGINS OF THEIR POWERFUL NEW EFFORT, *RESIST*.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **DANIEL BOUM**.

The world has changed a lot since 2002, to say the very least. Up until that December, Midnight Oil had thrived as Australia's premiere protest band, cranking out a lengthy string of rock hits as poignant politically as they were musically. And though its members stayed active in the social justice movements of the 21st century – frontman Peter Garrett even going so far as to become a minister – the band itself called it quits after their 11th album, 2002's *Capricornia*.

Now – amid a global pandemic, a myriad of disasters incited by climate change, the mainstream rise of far-right malice and World War III on the cusp of eruption – the Oils have returned to soundtrack the revolution of the 2020s. As longstanding axeman Jim Moginie tells *Australian Guitar*, the band now see themselves as the elders of Australia's political rock movement. But that doesn't make *Resist* – their 12th full-length effort, riding on the heels of last year's mini-LP *The Makarrata Project* – any less intense, provocative or insightful.

We talk to Moginie about the whirlwind origins of both *Resist* and *The Makarrata Project*, how the new record makes the most of the Oils' legacy, and how 15 years of creative exploration reignited the shredder's musicality.

What was it like to work on *Resist* and *The Makarrata* Project concurrently?

We had a really concentrated period of recording. I've got a little studio up in Sydney, and that effectively became the Midnight Oil clubhouse. And because it'd been such a long time since we'd been in the studio, the songs just came pouring out. Pete had some a few of these Syd Barrett-y kind of songs, which was really fascinating and weird. And then Rob had 'First Nation' and 'Gadigal Land', which made us all think, "Whoa, game on!"

We banded down real fast. We just didn't muck around, because we thought, "Well, a band like us, we'll just play it live." We knew the songs pretty well by then – we had the demos, and we pretty much just followed the demos. We'd even use some of the sounds from the demos in the actual recordings – some of the sounds that were a bit wobbly and ethereal, or hard to recreate. We did most of the recording in about a six week period – five-day weeks, eight-hour days.

With the kind of legacy Midnight Oil has – especially 20 years since *Capricornia* – we know that you wouldn't have put this album out if you didn't *need* to put it out. What makes *Resist* such a critical record in the Midnight Oil catalogue?

We're almost like the elders now, y'know? People like Jack River and John Butler are doing great things with activism and music together, and I get the feeling that – especially recently, with Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins in Canberra – there's this change afoot. There's a generational shift that's happening, and I can feel it in the water. But I think music and politics have always gone together. Look at 'A Change Is Gonna Come' by Sam Cooke – that's one of the most beautiful protest songs ever written.

I feel like we're part of this grand tradition – we're kind of standing on the shoulders of those people. And I don't think there's anything particularly new in what we're saying. This album, *Resist*, is basically a protest record. And in the grand tradition of protest records, every song is about an issue. I think that's just who we are as people, y'know?

But I also think that you can't just have someone strumming on a G chord for 20 minutes, going on about how f***ed capitalism is and yelling about, "Down with the man! Patriarchy! Blah, blah, blah!" You need a good tune and a cracking beat, a good melody and a hook. And I think [Midnight Oil] do that well, because we love our music. We're always suckers for a good tune, whether it's a political song or not.

You kept wickedly busy during the Oils' hiatus, between a multitude of other projects, and all your production work. Did you find that when you came back to the Oils, you did so with a new, or expanded palette of skills?

Yeah, definitely. Up until that period of time when Pete went into politics, we were very much a group, very cloistered and very sheltered – we weren't very open to the world. But when the band split up, I suddenly found myself in this amazing musical community. I was doing session work on the Kasey Chambers record, producing Sarah Blasko and Silverchair, and playing with Bill Chambers. I mean, it was just meeting all the people, and seeing how different people's viewpoints were and where they were coming from, that's what was most interesting.

I also did a thing called the Electric Guitar Orchestra, when I was an artist in residence out at Campbelltown Art Centre. That was very much inspired by the works of Glenn Branca and Rhys Chatham – that New York no-wave guitar scene, that was very much in my head when the Oils came back together. It was a process of just using textures, or just flat ribbons of sound across a song, just to give it some tension or some background information; it wasn't so much about playing a song, but just creating an atmosphere. And I think that's pervaded quite a few of the songs on Resist.

But of course, it's all me and Martin, and Martin is my favorite guitar player in the world. Just standing alongside him every night, it's such a great honor. I never get sick of it; I never get sick of his sound.

What's that chemistry like between yourself and Mr. Rotsey, 45 years on?

We're very different players, but that's what's great about it. He's always up for experimenting and trying different things, so it's really beautiful to have that relationship back again. But guitar-wise, it's sort of like… Y'know, I remember when I was kid, standing in front of The Masters Apprentices at the Easter Show – I stood there and I looked at Doug Ford, he was using a Lenard amp and it was this huge wall of sound. And the sound was thick – it wasn't bright, it was very strong – and that burned into my brain what a guitar should sound like.

There's a lost Australian guitar sound, I have to say, because those amps – VASE, Lenard, Goldentones, Maton, Strauss – all of those amps were Australian-made, but of course when all the Marshalls and Fenders came in, we became like all the other countries. It's a great era to go back to, because the guitarists were sort of playing Deep Purple or Free-inspired music, but the sound of it was really different. It had this incredible heft to it – this real weightiness. I remember going to see Kevin Borich Express and The La De Da's – bands like that – and that sound really… It was such a beautiful thing. It's a shame it's been lost.

Now, it's a totally different thing – everyone uses virtual amps, or they have little amps because sound guys always complain about the guitarists' volume onstage. There's become a law of diminishing returns, I think – because in the old days, those amps were *designed* to project to the back of the room, and that's not what happens now with the digital PA systems. It was a very different sound, with the old analog boards and the Yamaha EMX2000s.

LIVING IN THE MOMENT

ON HIS CAREER-DEFINING THIRD ALBUM, **WILLIAM CRIGHTON** CAPTURES THE HUMAN SPIRIT IN AN IMMENSELY POWERFUL WAY. WE LEARN HOW HE ENDEAVOURED TO DO SO.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **JULIEANNE CRIGHTON**.

Raised a Johnny Cash devotee in the NSW Riverina, it stands reason that William Crighton's art would sit flush in the centre of a three-way Venn diagram between searing and smoky blues-rock, dusty Australiana and rich, heartfelt roots. *Water And Dust* – Crighton's third full-length effort – amplifies his earnestness in all three areas, delivering an album that is intense in its impact, painstakingly crafted to take its listener on a deep and enthralling journey.

As its title and artwork make explicit, the record explores Australian culture with an intense sharpness, Crighton's love for his homeland unequivocally gallant. To parrot the label copy, it sees the songster tap into "the terrain, the people, the raw beauty, the danger the echoes of the past and the hopes for the future" – it is, in a few ways, the definitive Australian album of 2022.

"I like to think that all of these songs on *Water And Dust* have hope in them," Crighton said in announcing the record. "That country where we recorded 'Keep Facing The Sunshine' has a gentle and powerful nature that seemed to keep the darkness at bay. The people who have influenced me most are often the people who have been through real trauma and still manage to be grateful for the wonder of life. Even when something terrible happens you can usually still find a way to be grateful for the lesson."

Australian Guitar caught up with Crighton to dig further into the records origins, touching on the wide slate of collaborators featured on *Water And Dust*, and why its rawness is crucial to the overall listening experience.

How did you want *Water And Dust* to reflect your evolution as an artist?

Well that's right – I wanted to try and become a bit better of a player, and get a better understanding of things. I also wanted to shift up the sound a little bit, as far as it went with involving more people and going for a bit more of an expansive sound. I was really interested in combining different elements of music from people I knew – so William Barton, Jeff Lang, of course my wife Jules, and a few different drummers like Luke Davison, Matt Sherrod and Rob Hirst.

Obviously it's *my* record and all of that, but I put a lot of faith in the people around it to create the sound that I sort of envisaged. But it can always go either way in those situations. And it did – y'know, there were some really fortunate surprises that I couldn't have seen coming, which made it onto the album. I was interested in combining all these tones together to make that soundscape for the narrative to sit on, but a lot of it did come about through that "get in the room and see what happens" sort of process.

What was some of the surprises that changed this album's trajectory?

They just come about, y'know? For instance, 'Sunshine' was a surprise in the sense that Jules and I finished writing the song one morning, and we recorded it that same day – just bass, drums, guitar and vocal – and then Jeff Lang came in and put this really cool, African sort of riff on the Irish bouzouki. Those sort of things come about really spontaneously, and it's exciting. And then William Barton puts his didge on it, and all of a sudden we've created this soundscape that none of us saw coming.

That was the same with most of the songs, actually. It's one thing to think, "Oh yeah, we'll throw all of this stuff together and see what it sounds like," but it's another thing for it all to actually come together, into this cohesive sound where everything has its own place. And the musicians – everyone who played on this album invested their heart and soul into it, it seems. No-one was just going through the motions, everyone was really trying to be creative and do what was best for the song.

Were you all tracking a lot of this record live in the room?

A lot of it. All of the initial tracks, and a lot of the vocals, were recorded live – not necessarily in the same room, just because we wanted to isolate some of the sound, but at the same time, capture performances. I come from a live background, and I really wanted to capture the energy that happens when everybody's doing the same thing at the same time and sharing that space.

We did a lot of that at Jim Moginie's studio, Oceanic: we recorded live-to-tape, pick the track we liked, and then build on it from there. But not too much building – most of my guitars and vocals are just from those original tapes. I find that I just perform better that way. Lang overdubbed some stuff, because there's multiple tracks of him on there and he's a bit of a genius with the overdubbing. But I struggled to overdub stuff – I have to try and get it in the moment, otherwise I kind of go backwards.

Was there a lot of improv going on?

Totally, there was. It's like one of those things where you have have a song in your head, and so you're singing it and playing it as it comes out. And then you might try to forge it a few different ways, and it doesn't quite work, but then you finally come across it. Or you can play through it the first time, and there it is. One of the recordings is the first time anybody in the room had played the song except for me. And in the case of 'Stand', that was the first time anyone had really played the song at all, because we'd just finished writing it.

So when you listen back to the album, do you think, "Ah, if I had a few more weeks to work on that song, I would have done this or that," or have you been able to really embrace what came out in those sessions?

I mean, every time you hear something, you're going to think about what could have been done, or what should have been done, or what wasn't... But it's a different question to ask, "Well, *would* that have been better?" And I don't know the answer to that. Of course, I've thought about lots of different ways I could have done things. It's a funny line – for me, it's like you're trying to leave your ego behind, but you also try and become the song a little bit. You can't do it without becoming the vehicle for that song.

A lot of that is off the cuff – it's the first or second thoughts about a song that matter most. There are other songs where you go down the rabbit hole a bit further to figure it out, but most of the time, I end up coming back to the first couple of ideas I had anyway. Even with the lyrics: sometimes I'll write a song and it'll take me ages, Jules and I will work on it together for a year – sometimes more, even. And they're okay, but the songs that just *happen*, where the lyrics fall out real quick, they're the ones that seem to be the best.

For me, it's just about experiencing that song and being in it, and capturing something that is going to do it justice. I want to make something that honours a time and place and captures a feeling. The song is going to be done – and done differently – another thousand times before I'm dead. I always try to stay true to the essence and the spirit of a song, but I like to change it up when we play live, and let the song have a different feeling each time I play it.

SHINE ON

POND'S **SHINY JOE RYAN** ON THE BAND'S IMMINENT TOUR, THE DELUXE EDITION OF *9*, AND WHY IT'S CRUCIAL TO KEEP SHAKING THINGS UP.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **MATSU**.

For the first time in over two years, fans along the Australian east coast will chance to watch Pond, live in the flesh, this April. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has kept the WA psych-rockers bound to local stages (where they've played almost a dozen shows) since the plague broke out, but now they're primed to tear shit up in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne over three wild nights in April.

It's there we'll see Pond debut a stack from their ninth studio album, bluntly titled *9*. The release – which spans a tight nine tracks, because of course it does – saw the quintet return to their roots, jamming freely and emphasising fun over being fastidious. Shortly after the tour wraps up, they'll release a deluxe edition of the record with an extra four tracks, including the cool and crunchy 'Lights Of Leeming', the swaggering 'My Funny Serpentine' and the quirky ballad 'The TAB Took My Baby Away'.

To riff on both the upcoming tour and the new and improved *9*, we sat down with singer, guitarist, bassist and producer Shiny Joe Ryan.

This'll be the first time you've played outside WA in a hot minute, right?

Yes, a very hot minute! The tour got postponed what, twice? So yeah, I'm pretty excited! Everyone is! We played our first show with some of the songs from *9* last Friday, and it was so much fun, so we're all terribly excited to take it out to the east coast and whatnot.

What was it like to debut those songs in front of a big-ass crowd?

It was great! Y'know, after you've written all those songs, and then you've waited for the album to come out, by the time you actually get to play it all live, it can be a full year or two later. So it was really satisfying to be able to finally drop it on people – and a lot of fun to play, too. It's nice to be putting the new songs into the set, y'know, it sort of breathes a bit of new life into it all.

So when it comes to the full tour, what tracks from *9* are you looking forward to busting out?

Well I've finally reintroduced a wah pedal back into my board, and that's there for 'Toast' – so that's pretty fun. It went down quite well the other day.

Do you like to find those little opportunities to improvise when you're performing?

Yeah, for sure. Instead of just playing everything note-for-note from the album, we like to figure out ways to include little parts of something different. Or maybe blend two songs together – something from an old album with one of the new songs. That's great when you don't really want to play the whole song, but there's like a really cool chorus or riff – you can just pluck it out and throw it on the end of another song.

So what does your live setup look like at the moment?

I'm thinking about changing up my amp, actually. At the moment I've got a Fender Twin, but I think I want something with a bit more channel volume, so I can get a bit more gain. The other day, when we were using the Twin, it was on like 1.2 and it was still too loud, there was nowhere to go with it. So yeah, I'm figuring that one out at the moment. My pedalboard is rigged up so that I'm playing guitar, obviously, but I could also do vocoder, and then a little side chain that goes into a few other things, so you could play a guitar synth and do a few other things with it. It's a jack-of-all-trades setup, really.

Is that the same kind of gear you tend to use in the studio?

Absolutely, yeah. Jay [Watson, vocals and multi-instrumentalist] collects all kinds of wild and wonderful guitar pedals. He comes into the studio sometimes and he's like, "Oh yeah, this is the fuzz pedal from 'Convinced Of The Hex' by The Flaming Lips," or, "Check out this auto-wah" – and of course I'm just there like like, "Oooooh, auto-wah!" Between the lot of us, we have quite an interesting guitarsenal.

What were some of those secret weapons?

See, *9* was a bit different – we went back to that old kind of 'jam band' territory. Because Jay – I don't know why he has it, but he's got a roll of one-inch recording tape, so we just spent three days filling it up, dumping it into Ableton, filling it up, dumping it, filling it up... So we were pretty much just writing stuff on the fly, doing two 15-minute jams to fill up the tape, and then repeating the process.

I can't remember if we actually used anything too wild in those initial sessions, but I do have this one pedal that I've been really into for the past couple of months: it's called a JHS Colour Box, and it kind of replicates the channel strip on an old Neve desk, so you can get that Beatles-y Revolution tone, or you can dumb it down and take a bit a high pass off your bass – it's pretty much good for anything. It's my new go-to pedal.

So after the tour wraps up, in May, you've got a deluxe edition of *9* hitting shelves with four extra songs. Did these come from the same sessions as the rest of the album?

They did, actually, but in our quest for a tight album, we cut them loose. Sometimes you just don't want to do a double album on vinyl, y'know? Sometimes it's nice just to do a single, concise bit of wax. So they're all really good songs, I think – they just didn't quite make the first cut. But when the idea was floated about, maybe doing a deluxe album, it was like, "Well, we've got those songs!" We just sat back down and touched them up a bit. They're quite fun to listen to, if I may say so myself.

I know you haven't even been able to take *9* on the road yet, but I am curious, have you guys started to think about where album #10 might take Pond?

I've been thinking about it, at least. But I don't honestly know. Like, this album was so strange – it came together quite differently than I expected, but it was good. It was such a pleasant experience. So who knows? I'd only be spitballing if I were to tell you – if I had any clue to begin with – so we'll just have to see what happens. Maybe we'll do it all again in another yearlong jam session.

Do you make a conscious effort to keep switching up the process and keep things fresh as a songwriter?

Absolutely! I think it's probably healthier for everything, to keep everyone enjoying it. I think you have to switch up the recording process every now and again, just to keep it exciting. Everyone would still be excited to record if we did it the same way every time, but y'know, we live in a beautiful town where you can either go out to the bush or one of the heap of recording studios that our friends have – it's not like we're stuck in the middle of New York with no way to transport our gear anywhere [*laughs*].

FAMILY FIRST

BUDJERAH FILLS US IN ON HIS STRIKING NEW EP *CONVERSATIONS*, AND THE STRONG TIES BETWEEN HIS ART AND HERITAGE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **ELLIOTT LAUREN RYAN**.

Fame struck Budjerah like a truck: the Coodjinburra songster dropped his eponymous debut EP last March, and by the year's end had become a national sensation with truckloads of records sold, opening spots on tours with acts like Thelma Plum, The Avalanches and Lime Cordiale, a god-tier collab with EDM megastars Pnau, and wins at both the ARIAs (Breakthrough Artist) and National Indigenous Music Awards (New Artist Of The Year). But despite his sudden thrusting into the mainstream, Budjerah has remained resoundingly humble.

When he jumps on a Zoom call with *Australian Guitar*, the 19-year-old is brushing off crumbs from a sausage roll he snagged from his favourite local bakery. He still lives in the coastal NSW town of Fingal Head, with strong ties to his community in the Bundjalung nation. His scintillating second EP, *Conversations*, offers fans a more intimate look behind the curtain: it lays Budjerah's soul bare, each line intensely impactful and each accompanying soundscape – built up of glittering synths, cool atmospherics, crisp beats and the warm strums of his guitar – even more so.

Budjerah's go-to guitar is a Fender Acoustasonic Stratocaster, special to him not just because of its wicked playability, masterful design and sweet, sweet tone. At the start of February, his management team secretly teamed up with Fender Australia to have a custom axe whipped up, featuring artwork minted by Budjerah's uncle. We chatted with Budjerah about that guitar, *Conversations*, and how his family and art are always going to be intrinsically linked.

How did you want this EP to build on what you'd laid out with your self-titled record?

I know we should probably be talking about how the guitar, but I've always viewed myself more as a singer. So with the first EP I was like, "Yeah, I'm gonna have these massive intervals between the chorus and the verses, and I'm just going to sing my butt off!" But a lot of the time, when people heard me sing the songs, they were like, "Oh, I didn't really think much of you as a singer." I would sing my songs, and then I'd sing like an old soul song, or a gospel song, and they'd be like, "Wow, you're actually a singer!" So with this EP, I was like, "I just need to sing harder, so then people will go 'Yeah, he's a great singer!'"

When it comes to what kind of sounds you feel like jamming out, does it all come down to the vibe you're in?

Yeah, it definitely depends. I've been wanting to write more upbeat songs, but I think with my writing process, it's sort of whatever music I'm hearing around me, I'll write to match that. And normally, whatever comes out in the lyrics is just an emotional dump – it's just me letting out whatever has been going on in my head. If you listen to ['What Should I Do?'], it's very literal. Everything in that song actually happened to me, and the production was just super... It's upbeat and funky, but when you listen to the lyrics, you're like, "Oh wow, that doesn't sound too good. That sounds like he had a real hard time". The music just brings it out, I think.

As for the gear, the big ticket item here is, of course, this incredible Acoustasonic Strat that features your uncle's artwork. What was going through your head when you saw that for the first time?

We were shooting a music video, and one of my managers brought it to the shoot. Heath [Blows] from Fender, he sent me my other Acoustasonic, and he was like, "Yeah, we'll send you another guitar before you go on tour." I thought I was just going to get a regular Strat, because I've wanted to get more into playing an actual electric guitar. But the box showed up to the shoot and they were like, "Yeah, we got this thing from Fender."

I recognised the case because it was the case that my other Acoustasonic came in, and I was like, "Wait, why did they send me another Acoustasonic? I've already got one!" My mum was there, and she was like, "Just open it!" It was such a surprise. After the ARIAs, my team were all like, "Yeah, let's do something real cool, let's get the artwork to match the CD cover," and... I just love it.
The artwork tells the story of my background. Budjerah means 'first light', because I was born as the sun rose in the morning; and if you look at the artwork, there's a big circle just above the sound hole – that's the Morning Star, which is the last star to leave the sky in the morning. And then there's The Three Brothers: in Bundjalung, all the tribes come from The Three Brothers, that's like the start of the story for Bundjalung nation. So it's really special, to see all those things represented in the artwork.

How important is it for you to stay connected to your community and culture?

It's very important. I still live in the community I grew up in – if I walk next next door, all of my grandparents and uncles and my family are all there. We're very lucky to still have our language, and our dances, and all of our traditions intact, so it's very important to me to embrace that. And just knowing who you are is so important – it keeps you sane, I think. If I didn't know where I was going, or if I didn't have a place I could go back to, I think I'd just go crazy. I know I can always come back home to my family and to the place where I belong.

Have you and your uncle always bonded over your artistic similarities?

He's a guitarist as well. Maybe I'm a bit biased, but in my eyes, he's one of the greatest guitarists I've ever heard. He did the artwork for my first CD, and he actually played on a few of the tracks, too. He was at the studio, and while I was recording vocals, we were like, "What could we do with this?" We were doing a limited edition CD version of [the self-titled EP], and I asked him, "Do you want to do the artwork?" And he just brought along a little canvas and painted the artwork.

If you walk next door, there's paintings of his everywhere. They're all done in that same style; there's one for my name, and he's done my cousin's name, and it's all just representative of, like, our stories and our culture's stories. It's just incredible. He's started painting all of this incredible artwork in the last year or so, I reckon.

What was it like to have him there with you in the studio?

It's really good. It's just fun. My dad is a drummer as well; my dad and his brothers, they're all musicians, and they played in the church band with my mum and all of her siblings. So my dad and my uncle, they came along played all the instruments on, like, four extra tracks [for the self-titled EP]. We were all just jamming. They knew the songs, and it was really easy because they both know exactly what we wanted. We were all just on the same page.

THE REAL DEAL

GANG OF YOUTHS' INSTRUMENTAL MASTERMIND **JUNG KIM** FILLS US IN ON THE LONDON-VIA-SYDNEY BAND'S LANDMARK THIRD ALBUM, *ANGEL IN REALTIME*: AN OPULENT EPIC, AMBITIOUS EVEN FOR THEM.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **ED COOKE.**

Though grandeur has always been a cornerstone of their sound, Gang Of Youths' long-awaited third album, *Angel In Realtime,* takes the Sydney-native, London-based outfit to new heights of sonic opulence. It's a conceptual epic, following frontman Dave Le'aupepe on a personal journey as learns about his estranged father's heritage and background – much of which was kept was kept secret – in the wake of his death. As such, it far eschews the dancey indie-rock slant of the band's first two records, and dives deep into the well of widescreen theatre-pop they'd only touched on scantly prior.

Part of the musical shift comes down to a change in personnel: the band's lead guitarist, Joji Malani, left the fold in 2019, leaving Jung Kim – who formerly held down the rhythm section – to step into his role. Tom Hobden filled the subsequent gap left by Kim, but came with more skill as a violinist. Flanked by that and Kim's kaleidoscopic prowess as a keyboardist, *Angel In Realtime* sports an expansive and experimental palette, building lush gardens of musicality for Le'aupepe's reverberant tenor to frolic through.

Australian Guitar caught up with Kim to explore how Gang Of Youths' new effort pushes the band to exciting new heights, and how they endeavoured to reinvent themselves right in the midst of their mainstream breakthrough.

How did you want this record to reflect Gang Of Youths' musical evolution over the last five years?

Personally, I think having so much time off – like the rest of the world did – to just sit and ruminate and figure out how to deal with space and time, I've come to discover so much new music. Because that's kind of all we had. I had so much time to figure out all the things that I missed out on, growing up, because I never really had a childhood where my parents would shower me with music – it was very much just classical music in my household. So learning about contemporary music, these past two or three years have been amazing for that. Especially with the beauty of streaming, being able to look up any playlist and discover so many new artists.

Also, to be able to learn so much about the stories that we're trying to tell on this record, in terms of what Dave experienced in the last couple of years with his cultural heritage. There was a lot to explore with the passing of his father, and a lot of the things that were revealed to him in the aftermath of that. So while I've grown so much musically, I've also been coming into my own as an adult because of all these universal themes and life experiences that we all eventually, inevitably, have to go through. It's been really enriching. But of course, I'm glad to be on the other side of what was – I'm sure for everyone – a stressful few years.

The first thing I noticed with this record is that there's actually not that much guitar on it. How did your relationship with the instrument change on this record?

I think my relationship with the guitar had to mature quite a bit. The way I would describe everyone's role in the band, in terms of the songwriting and production, is that I wouldn't say any of us were necessarily glued to a single instrument. I think that's why there is such a little guitar, in a traditional sense. On *Go Farther In Lightness*, there were a lot more thrashier kinds of sounds – a lot more distortion and fuzz, and stuff like that – but I think because we've already done that, and we've also stepped into this new phase of trying to make a record, from the point of view that all of us could kind of pick up any instrument we wanted, it just ended up being a record where there was just not so much guitar.

We were just more interested in playing piano, or playing around with modular synthesisers, or chopping up samples and stuff like that. And that just naturally became our interest, I think, because it's something we'd never really done before. That was just way more exciting than doing that thrashy wall of sound again. But in terms of when and where guitar was used on this album, I think we had to be more conservative because there's so much space being occupied. I mean, when every corner and crevice of the musical campus is occupied in some way, you have to be a lot more tensional.

How meticulous is that process, finding where every element fits? Is part of it just creative serendipity, or do you really slave over the mix?

Yeah, I feel like "slaving away" might be the best way to describe it, to be completely frank. We definitely were slaving away at trying to figure out exactly what fits where, and what felt right. A lot of the time, when we'd play guitar, normally we'd be like, "Whatever, that works I guess," but this time around we were pretty surgical. I think we had a pretty strong sense of what sounds and textures we wanted to reference; a lot of that lended itself to neoclassical influences, like Steve Reich or Philip Glass – which is obviously not guitar music at all. At some point in the middle – or around the end – of the song 'Unison', there's this sort of meandering, cascading guitar loop in the background, and that is definitely a reference to that minimalist music that we're trying to incorporate into the record.

There's a lot more acoustic guitar than electric, too. Did that go hand in hand with the more intimate feel that a lot of these songs are framed around?

For sure. I think mostly because we have so much interest in complexity, coming from all these other instruments that never really featured in our music before. I think the guitar naturally had to fill the space that those things weren't, which often meant it needed to be really delicate – a lot of the time, I'd just play chords in the background, and just strum away to provide that harmonic sort of bed. And I mean, I'm always so tempted to just create the coolest lick, or feature the coolest sound or whatnot – but I guess that's just where that creative maturity had to kick in. There's a level of humility you have to have when you're dealing with music that's so dense and complex. It really is "the humble guitar" at this point.

Well going back to that notion of creative growth, this is, of course, the first album with Tom in the mix and Joji out of it. Was that shift in dynamic something you had to adjust to?

Definitely. I mean naturally, I had to take over that role, being more of a guitar player. And although I grew up playing guitar, it was such a weird transition. In the ten-plus years that I've been in Gang Of Youths, I've always been more in the mindset of a keyboardist and a synthesist, and someone who's really into production. And so all of a sudden, to put this hat on and try to be a guitar player – but at the same time, be a guitar player that took a bit of a backseat – it was really kind of jarring for me.

And definitely, yeah, I guess it took a long time for me to realise that y'know, although I am *technically* the guitarist in this band, there's so much that I think that I can dive into, that could be of use to the band, other than just being someone who can shred.

BACK TO THE GROVE

OCEAN GROVE'S SAM BASSAL PEELS BACK THE CURTAIN FOR AN INSIDE LOOK AT HOW THEIR ONE-OF-A-KIND 'ODDWORLD' OPERATES.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**.
PHOTO BY **MICHELLE GRACE HUNDER**.

Throughout history, there have been oodles of bands plagued by shit luck – and as far as Australia's ever-burgeoning heavy music scene is concerned, Ocean Grove might very well just take out the top prize. They've navigated controversy, a revolving door of personnel, and all manner of behind-the-scenes clusterf***ery – to say the least, their tell-all book will be one *hell* of a read – but perhaps their most punishing blow was doled in the lead-up to their second album, *Flip Phone Fantasy*.

It was just two days before its March 13th, 2020 release that the WHO declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, effectively axing the group's plans – ambitious ones at that – to make their assault on the international stage. But never the ones to let a hiccup doom them, Ocean Grove wasted no time dusting off their thinking caps, and almost immediately started chipping away at LP3.

Flip Phone Fantasy was interesting for the way it evolved Ocean Grove's musicality; there was a heightened focus on their indie-rock, grunge and Britpop influences, stepping even farther away from the bold and barbarous nu-metal they'd cut their teeth on years before. It was a striking effort, and made a clear case for Dale Tanner's viability as a frontman (he'd previously played bass in Ocean Grove, but stepped up to the mic when their old singer left). But comparing it to their new album, *Up In The Air Forever* – a very tongue-in-cheek title, given the band's unlucky streak – *Flip Phone Fantasy* feels... Well, kinda *safe*.

The new disc is packed from start to end with Ocean Grove's most striking, soulful and spellbinding material. It sees them push boundaries and toy with their binary of genre more fiercely than ever – which is really saying something, given that's been their whole schtick since 2010. To learn more about how they did it, *Australian Guitar* caught up with the band's musical mastermind, Sam Bassal.

Having made such a major leap in a new direction with Flip Phone Fantasy, did you all feel more confident heading into this new record?

I think so. The one big thing we're trying to do with this record in particular is break the stigma behind what a band should sound like. When people think of a band, they tend to think of a drummer, a guitarist, a singer and a bassist – and each of them play that exact role. But I want people to look at Ocean Grove as a bit more of a group of independent artists coming together and collaborating, rather than a traditional band. I think a lot of our fans know this, but it might not be common knowledge: I'm the only person that's ever played an instrument on an Ocean Grove album. I've written all of our music, and played every guitar part on all three albums. I'm the predominant songwriter, and I always have been – so even though we're obviously just a three-piece now, it's still the same people writing and playing the music. And with the dynamic – a song like 'HMU', for example, I sing on that, and then a lot of the other vocals on the record are split evenly between Dale and Twiggy.

Do you still have Running Touch involved behind the curtain?

Definitely, yeah! He will always be part of like the Oddworld collective. I think with this record in particular, he was so busy with putting together his own album – which is *awesome* – that he took a bit of a backseat. This one was primarily Twiggy, Dale and I – but no matter what, Running Touch will always be a part of Ocean Grove.

Some of the biggest songs on [debut album] *The Rhapsody Tapes* were *heavily* written by him, and quite a few of the best songs of *Flip Phone* as well. So he'll always be a part of the team, no matter what the amount of input he puts in or how much influence he has. The Oddworld collective is fun because there's no rules to who does what, or how much they do. [Running Touch] might not have been super involved in this record, but who knows, he could end up writing 80 percent of the next one!

[Guitarist] Matt Henley also left the band last year – did he have much input on the record before he left?

Not too much. It was written pretty heavily over Zoom and things like that, and I this record came about pretty fast. It feels like so long ago now, but yeah, he decided to go and do his own thing before we started knuckling down on it. We're all still good friends with Matt – there's no bad bad blood between us at all, we all love him to bits – but [his departure] didn't really affect us too much. It's definitely been a change, though. This will be our third album with a different lineup [*laughs*].

How do you feel about the strength of the band in its current form?

It's a funny one, isn't it? I think change is always going to be looked at with two different mindsets – you'll have people that will forever attach this band to the members we've had in the past and things we've done, but then there's people who will continue to look at [Ocean Grove] as a group of good friends putting out incredible music. I think depending on which way people look at change, or see where our band is now, they'll come to their own conclusions. But we're accepting of everyone. We just want people to enjoy our music, no matter which way they see [the band].

What kind of guitars were you swinging around in the studio for this record?

I've never had much high-end gear, throughout my entire musical journey. I've recorded, mixed and mastered every Ocean Grove album on a very shit computer, with things that *shouldn't* have been able to make that kind of sound come to life. I have one main guitar, which I've actually used on everything for the last three or four years – it's a US Fender Tom DeLonge Strat. It's the best guitar I've ever played.

Even when I'm producing for other bands, I'll bring that guitar in just to make sure that it's doing what it needs to be doing. It's got the one Seymour Duncan Invader and one volume knob, and that's it. We're definitely not a nerdy guitar band at all [*laughs*]. I just want to be able to write a riff, hit record and play – nothing fancy. I think on the new record, there may have been a few moments where I used a really nice Custom Shop Gibson, but pretty much anything else has just been on that Strat, played straight into the computer.

But your tonal palette is just fucking insane! What are your secret weapons?

I've got a few! Again, I've never really had that much top-shelf gear, so I've always relied on amp sims and digital equivalents of amps, rather than being able to have Kempers and all that sort of stuff. I don't know if I've actually said this to anyone before, but the main guitar sound I use – and have used on every Ocean Grove record – is a digital amp sim by a company called TSE, and the amp is just called X50.

I always have heavy, thick guitars with this sort of distorted palette, but I always blend them with surf-rock chorus-y type guitars. I think that started with 'Sunny', on the last record, where you heard a bit more of that Britpop-y guitar tone shining through. That's a lot more prevalent on this record in particular – as I'm sure you can hear – and for that sort of sound, I've just been using the default amp plugin on my Universal Audio Apollo interface. It's just like a Fender Twin – I run my guitar into a Fender Twin, then into a chorus pedal, and I compress the shit out of it.

HEAVEN ON EARTH

SHORT STACK ARE BACK (YET AGAIN), AND THIS TIME AROUND, THEY'RE SHAKING THINGS UP BY GOING BACK TO THE CLASSICS.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **PAT O'HARA**.

It's safe to say by now that if you're a fan of Short Stack, you've probably developed some trust issues. They announced their third album, *Art Vandelay*, in October of 2011 – only to scrap it and break up some five months later. The record was then shadow-dropped by their old label in 2013, leading fans to believe a reunion was imminent… But alas, that turned out to be a false alarm. They did eventually return the next year, though, making huge news of a comeback tour and album – even going so far as to call it *Homecoming* – in 2015. But after a sole national tour in support of that record, the band slipped right back into the shadows.

Like clockwork, Short Stack have reemerged for a third shot at bandom – although this time, they're not making any wild promises about their longevity. The Budgewoi-native pop-rockers have been candid about their plans, admitting that their upcoming album *Maybe There's No Heaven* (their fourth "official" full-length, frontman Shaun Diviney says, as the trio don't consider *Art Vandelay* canonical) came about almost by chance. It began with their 2020 reunion, which initially cropped up purely out of a want to play a short run of shows in theatre venues, in part as an official "farewell" after the *Homecoming* run came to an unexpectedly abrupt end.

After the shows sold out in minutes and the tour ballooned into their biggest run yet, Diviney and his cohort reconsidered Short Stack's future. With the tour pushed all the way back to this June, they had plenty of time to hit the studio and bash out a new record: part a celebration of their halcyon days, echoing 2009's *Stack Is The New Black*, and part a bold look ahead to an experimental future. And they had to make it count – Diviney tells *Australian Guitar* that for now, at least, there's no follow-up to Heaven on the cards.

Let's start by going back to *Homecoming*, because I feel like that whole "comeback" lasted… What, like three months? What happened there, and then what drew you all back together this time?

We were just kind of over it, more than anything else. It's honestly a very hard thing to do, to be a full-time touring musician. We've always said that if we get to the point where we're not enjoying it, we'll just stop. And that's what we did both times [we broke up]. That album did pretty well – I think it was the #1 Australian album for that week, and Top 5 overall – but we just weren't weren't feeling it. When you're touring, you're away from home for so long, and you just get over it. But we're definitely not over it at the moment!

Do you feel more confident about Short Stack now, and I guess your path as a musician in general these days?

Yeah, 100 percent. Despite everything I just said, it's the best thing in the world to be able to play music with people. And we always get asked, with 'Sway Sway Baby' and 'Princess' and songs like that – people are like, "Aren't you sick of playing those songs!?" I'm like, "No! They're my favorite songs to play!" Because they're the songs that people grew up with, and they're the songs that people resonate with. It's always daunting to throw a *new* song into the set and go, "Oh man, I hope people like this…"

So how did *Heaven* start coming to life? Did you have to ease your way back into the songwriting process, or were you all dying to just dive headfirst back in?

Honestly, we didn't even want to release an album – or do any new music at all, really. We thought we'd just do the tour, play to a couple hundred people, and then that'd be it. We just did it a bit of fun, more than anything else – but then all the shows sold out, and it ended up turning into one of the biggest tours we've ever done. And so we started having a chat with with Jaddan from UNIFIED, and he put us in touch with Caleb and Florian, who look after us at UNFD. It all just kind of happened by accident. We had no intention of making any music, but we were like, "Well, we've got this opportunity, let's make the most of it!"

So where exactly is it that you wanted to take Short Stack on LP4?

When it first started, we had three songs leftover from when we broke up. We thought those would be a good starting point, but not one of them ended up making the album. We just felt like all the new stuff we were doing was a lot better. I really wanted to start the album with 'Armageddon', because that's quite a pop-punk vibe, and the first songs we wrote were all pop-punk songs. We wanted to make a real throwback, Blink-esque pop-punk kind of album. And then towards the end of it, we started writing the ones like 'Burn You Down' and 'Live4' – not so much experimental stuff, but a little more in a direction we'd never really explored before.

I want to riff on some of the gear that went into this record (no pun intended). What guitars were you tearing shit up on?

Just so you know, I've made it very clear to all my bandmates and managers that I am *by far* the worst guitarist you will ever speak to – let's just throw that out there before we go into it [*laughs*]. We did the majority of the album on an old Tele Deluxe that Stevie [Knight] from The Dead Love had – that had a really cool vibe. For the heavier things, like on 'Burn You Down', we had a real big Drop D Gibson, and we f***ing monstered the shit out of it. But pretty much every guitar part on every album we've put out, I played on the Tele Deluxe.

What is it about that Tele that just makes your heart skip a beat?

I never *want* to go back to it, because I'm like "Nah, let's try something different this time." But then we put it on just for fun, and we're like, "Ah f***, this sounds like Short Stack – we've gotta go with it."

What about in the way of things like effects as well? Are you much of a slut for pedals?

A little bit, but we did a lot of [*Heaven*] with a good ol' Tubescreamer, just plugged in through an AC30. Especially for this record, because there's a lot of synths and stuff like that, it made sense not to overcomplicate the guitar sound. I did all the guitar with Stevie, who mixed the album – he's doing Stand Atlantic['s new album], and he's obviously in The Dead Love as well, so he really knew what he was doing. We just wanted to go for that classic pop-punk sound.Like that, you know, straight up. kind of crunchy, cheap screamer vibe.

Well that straight-up, kind of crunchy, Tube-y vibe – that's '90s pop-punk in a nutshell. That's Blink as f*.**

Yeah, and that was exactly what we wanted to do. We were like, "Let's make a Blink record." We referenced them a lot in the studio – and Green Day as well, to a certain extent. But yeah, that real crunchy, overdriven tone… It's controlled distortion, I guess. It's easy and it's fun.

Sometimes less is more – some of the best songs of all time are simple as hell.

Which is lucky for me, because all the technical stuff is too hard [*laughs*]. I grew up listening to Blink and NOFX and stuff like that, and it's like, "Eh, they're all pretty shitty guitarists, maybe I don't need to be that good." But then you start playing festivals with bands like Northlane and you're like, "Oh f***, they're actually, like… *Good*."

AN EXPLOSIVE RETURN

MIKE CAMPBELL'S SECOND ALBUM WITH **THE DIRTY KNOBS**, *EXTERNAL COMBUSTION*, SHOWS HIM ROCKIN' 'N' ROLLIN' LIKE NEVER BEFORE. HERE'S HOW HE BROUGHT IT TO LIFE.

WORDS BY **MATT DORIA**. PHOTO BY **CHRIS PHELPS**.

Over some 50 storied years of shredding, Mike Campbell has played on over 50 albums for over 30 artists – he's jammed with everyone from Paula Abdul to Roy Orbison, and cut his teeth as an integral member of Stevie Nicks' brass. The '80s saw him working closely with Bob Dylan (and he rejoined the fold for 2009's *Together Through Life*), and in the latter half of the 2000s, he was Neil Diamond's go-to guy. But if there's one thing most people know Campbell for, it's his longstanding role in The Heartbreakers, strumming side-by-side with Tom Petty from 1976 all the way up until Petty's death in 2017.

During the last decade or so of his Heartbreakers tenure, Campbell led a rock 'n' rolling side-project called The Dirty Knobs. It started off as a bit of fun – a way for Campbell to flex his muscles in a different setting every now and then – but after Petty's untimely passing, he pivoted the project into his full-time gig. The band's 2020 debut, *Wreckless Abandon*, was an intentional easing-in for longtime fans, to show off his new palette without scaring away any skeptics. But for his second full-length effort with The Dirty Knobs – the very aptly titled *External Combustion* – he's gone full steam ahead with the stomping, skanking, swampy and soulful jammage.

Australian Guitar got Campbell on the phone to riff (no pun intended) on the way this game-changing record made it from his mind to the Marshalls.

I want to start by going back to *Wreckless Abandon*, because in a lot of ways, that was like a formal introduction to this project – despite the fact it'd already been around for a solid 15 years by then. Having finally made that album, did it feel like this project had grown into something new? Or have you managed to maintain that loose and experimental chemistry?

We have managed to maintain our loose and experimental chemistry. We've been together a long time, too, so there's nothing that was just thrown together – The Dirty Knobs have been playing between Heartbreakers tours for the last 15 years or more, so we're very comfortable with each other. And I'm very comfortable stepping into a leading role this band. I loved supporting Tom in the Heartbreakers, where I had somewhat of a co-captain role, but now I'm the captain in this band, and it feels right. Of course, I'm sad – I'm still grieving for my friend – but I must carry on. And if I must carry on, I would rather carry on with these guys, because we love each other and we make some good sounds together.

I can only imagine how many songs you would've accumulated for *Wreckless Abandon*, having 15 storied years worth of material backlogged. Did it almost feel like a weight off your chest to get all of those songs out there?

Well, I haven't it gotten all out yet! There's still shelves of old demos there, waiting to be sifted through... It's kind of overwhelming, to be honest. I just write so much – and y'know, some of it's crap, but there's some real gems in there. I'm in the process of going through all of the old analog tapes. Three or four of the songs songs on [*External Combustion*] were found that way – I had completely forgotten about them, but I pulled them out and I thought, "Y'know, this would fit on the new album!" But it's just a little overwhelming to keep up with all the writing, because I'm just obsessed.

So going into album #2, how did you want to kick The Dirty Knobs up to the next level?

We're always trying to kick it up, write better songs, play better... *Improve* – that's the word I'm looking for. You always want to improve. The first album kind of set up that we're a boogie/rock 'n' roll band with '60s influences – that's where we're coming from, and that's what I'm inspired by. But for the second record, I didn't put much thought into that. I thought, "Let's keep doing what we're doing, and hope that we come up with some good songs." And I think we did! I think some of the songwriting on the new album is a little deeper and a little more explorative than it was on the first album. I think that's an improvement. But essentially, we're just trying to keep the bones of it being a four-piece band having fun when we play – because that's what we do.

How important is the creative dynamic you have with the rest of the band?

Oh, it's very important. I mean, I could have made this record as a solo record, brought in some studio cats and taught them the songs. It probably would've sounded pretty good, too. But I wanted it to sound like a *band*. I wanted to have all the blemishes and imperfections that are just right for what I'm going for. I didn't want to polish anything. We did very few overdubs – almost all the guitar solos were live on the floor, conjured up there during the take. That's what we were going for, so it's very important that this band is telepathic with me, and they follow me really well. And if I go in a certain direction, they do follow me really well.

Did you do this entire album live-to-tape?

Live yes, but we didn't use tape. We do everything digitally nowadays. Although, a couple of those old demos that I did on analog tape, they were really good, so I just took those tapes and overdubbed the Knobs onto those. But we recorded most of it live to digital. There very few overdubs with those recordings, because we just tried to get everything into the take while we were playing it.

Does it feel more "authentically rock 'n' roll" to record live?

I like both methods, y'know? I really do. But I *prefer* human contact and interaction – it makes it a little more fun. Recording alone can be fun sometimes – it's never a struggle to get the muse going – but I prefer to have the guys around me, interacting with me and hopefully bringing out something better in me, which I wouldn't get if I was just sitting there by yourself.

What kind of guitars were you tearing it up on for *External Combustion*?

I ended up using one guitar most of the time, because we were always in a hurry to play the next song and I didn't want to be wasting too much time changing guitars around. And I love this Les Paul I have, this '59 Les Paul, so we got our sound up on it and I just kept in clutch. It's a very versatile guitar, y'know, I can make it do a lot of things without swapping to another guitar. So probably around 95 percent of the of the record is that Les Paul. 'Electric Gypsy' is a Telecaster, because I wanted something that would do a string-bending thing. But that's the only guitar I remember changing over to.

So why is there a Firebird on the cover?

Well, because that's what I've been using live. I picked that up on the road, during the Fleetwood Mac tour, for $500. And I love it. It never made it to the studio for some reason, but when we started rehearsing, it definitely became the favourite. I'm never going to take the '59 Les Paul on tour because it's too valuable. So I pull out the Firebird, and it works really good for the live show.

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BRAND NEW NOISE

IN THE EARLY '80S, ALTERNATIVE ROCK BROKE THROUGH THE MAINSTREAM FASTER THAN ANY OTHER GENRE, SURGING ITS WAY UP THE CHARTS EVERYWHERE FROM AUSTIN, TEXAS TO TAMWORTH, AUSTRALIA. HERE ARE 25 GUITARISTS WHO FORGED THE SHAPE AND SOUND OF ALT-ROCK, FROM ITS PROTEAN BEGINNINGS TO THE PRESENT.

The first urgent stirrings of alternative rock aren't hard to find. Just look for the loudest, noisiest or most iconoclastic bands making a scene in the underground of rock and roll's early years. Long before the term "alternative rock" came into popular use, there existed a strain of guitar groups united in their disregard for convention and commercial acceptance.

The earliest prototypes can be found in 1960s garage rock acts like The Seeds and The Standells, whose use of feedback, distortion and inexpert playing laid the groundwork for rock's anti-conventional future genres. A few, like The Velvet Underground and The Stooges, took the music to experimental extremes on albums that remain touchstones for guitarists who have followed.

By the late 1970s, New York City's art rock scene brought us Television, Patti Smith and Talking Heads, proto-alt-rockers who were incorrectly swept into the punk dustpile. Meanwhile, the life force for the future alt-rock movement was underground and growing. It began to emerge in the early 1980s, simultaneously, via R.E.M. in the US and The Smiths in the UK. Both group's commercial successes opened the door to alt-rock's viability and led directly to the rise of the early '90s alternative explosion.

With the arrival of Nirvana, alt-rock came to the popular music's forefront. The genre dominated for much of the 1990s, but like all movements, it splintered and lost its potency. As the decade faded and the genre fractured further, a few guitarists – Jack White and Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood, namely – emerged as leading lights. Over these next pages, we explore the histories and contributions of these and other guitarists who fueled and continue to power the alternative rock scene.

LOU REED AND STERLING MORRISON

THE PROTOTYPE FOR ALT-ROCK GUITAR TANDEMS

Many guitarists will decry The Velvet Underground's lack of guitar expertise, but there is no avoiding the group's impact on alternative rock or its guitarists. Perhaps no album of theirs is as important in this regard as their first and most influential, 1967's *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. Beyond its music and anti-establishment production, the disc gave us the band's guitar tandem of Lou Reed and Sterling Morrison.

As players go, they couldn't be further apart. Reed was the bombastic one, drawing shrieks, squawks and drones from his guitar and creating at times a dense ambience of noise that could be an agitated precursor to the haunting drone of shoegaze. Check out his jagged lead work on 'Run, Run, Run', the exotic drones on 'All Tomorrow's Parties' or the cacophonous sonic cloud that engulfs 'European Son', all three from that remarkable debut.

Morrison, less celebrated, played the more traditional single-note lines and ringing arpeggiations on songs like 'Femme Fatale' and 'Pale Blue Eyes' from 1969's *The Velvet Underground*. That's him picking the bluesy sliding lead guitar line that loops hypnotically, and patiently, through 'I'm Waiting For The Man'. Those sliding notes are a hallmark of Morrison's style, heard on later recordings, like 'Pale Blue Eyes' and the *Velvet Underground* outtakes 'Foggy Notion' and 'Lisa Says'.

Bassist Doug Yule, who joined the group following the departure of founding member John Cale in 1968, offered up this first-hand analysis of Reed and Morrison's interplay in a 1997 interview. "Sterling always wound up with the more organised breaks while Lou favoured the longer, louder, raunchier ones," he said. "He had a brilliant sense of melody but an imperfect instrument. Sterling seemed to be just the opposite, more a process of technique that lacked a soaring vision."

It was together that they helped each other excel. Their interplay on 'Heroin' is remarkable, Morrison's strumming pushing Reed into ever-more frenzied soloing. On 'Sister Ray', their guitars, initially distinguishable by each player's style, merge over its 17-plus minutes, until it's impossible to tell who's doing what.

On their own, either would be easy to dismiss – Reed too provocative, Morrison too traditional, and both lacking technique – but as a tandem, they did their most revolutionary work. Significantly, their interplay established the template for many future alt-rock groups that featured a guitar duo, one player holding down the floor while the other lifts the music higher.

TOP TRACK: 'WAITING FOR THE MAN'

THURSTON MOORE AND LEE RANALDO

THE GODFATHERS OF ALT-ROCK

While guitarists like Reed, Morrison, Lloyd and Verlaine established the protocols for alt-rock guitar, the players with the most direct influence on the alt-rock movement that emerged in the 1980s were Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo. As part of New York City's post-punk no-wave movement, they were a tonic to punk's recycled rock riffs.

Their unusual tunings, bold harmonic experimentation and pioneering application of noise and textures made Sonic Youth an inspiration to countless bands and players. And if any group served as a bridge between

punk and alt-rock, it was Sonic Youth, who created the template for how an indie band could grow in popularity without losing credibility.

"We felt very liberated in the early '80s," Moore said, "because suddenly it was okay to be interested in anything – 20th-century composition, avant-garde jazz – rather than having to have that 'punk rules, everything else sucks' mentality."

Wielding Fender Jaguars and, toward the end of the '80s, heavily modified Jazzmasters, Moore and Ranaldo combined punk-rock attitude and song structure with open-tuning techniques, and invented one of the most radical approaches to the guitar in the history of rock.

"We're interested in textural sounds and the blendings of instruments in ways that don't fit into the standard lead and rhythm guitars and rhythm section backing it up," Renaldo told *Melody Maker* in 1985. "The music's got the emotion, the sentiment and the lyrical thinking of rock music. We're a rock band and proud of it. We're not an art, noise or extreme band. We just do what we do." He could have been speaking for the entire alt-rock nation.

TOP TRACK: 'CANDLE'

RICHARD LLOYD AND TOM VERLAINE

SIGNS OF INTELLIGENT LIFE

"We're like blues from another planet... Like rock music for aliens," Richard Lloyd once said of his groundbreaking New York City art-rock group, Television. "Ahmet Ertegun didn't want to sign us to Atlantic Records because he claimed we didn't play 'Earth Music'. I think he was right."

The key to Television's otherworldly approach was the guitar interplay between Lloyd and Tom Verlaine. Lloyd called their relationship as guitarists "telepathic", and indeed there is a conversation, if not an elaborate dance, taking place in their best work together: Lloyd's trenchant, Hendrix-inspired serpentine solos, performed on his '61 Fender Stratocaster, and Verlaine's slower, blues-inflected lead work, onto which he applied his 1958 Fender Jazzmaster's tremolo.

They met in the early 1970s while playing in Greenwich Village clubs. "I saw Tom play and I thought, 'He's got it.' And I knew I had it," Lloyd said. "But I was missing something, and so was he. What he was missing, I could supply. And vice versa."

And so they did. *Marquee Moon*, Television's 1977 debut, is stunning both for its songwriting and their guitar interplay. "All the filigrees and arabesques on *Marquee Moon* are all mine," says Lloyd, while Verlaine works more slowly and traditionally, building speed and harmonic interest as he finds his way forward. Together they carried forth the notion of art rock that fostered punk and, ultimately, the alt-rock movement that followed from it.

TOP TRACK: 'SEE NO EVIL'

ROBERT SMITH

THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

In The Cure's videos, he was traditionally seen without a guitar, leaving the impression that former co-guitarist Porl Thompson was behind the group's densely shimmering six-string magic. But Robert Smith is an excellent guitarist, who's applied his colourful tones and melodies to the group's songs in the studio.

"Even people who are quite close to the band are surprised to learn that I played the solo on 'The Edge Of The Deep Green Sea'," he told *Guitar Player* in 1990. "Everyone would immediately assume it's Porl."

While many of the Cure's detractors have probably let Smith's personal flamboyance divert their attention from the band's phenomenal pop craftsmanship and stylistic range, as their gargantuan worldwide following proves, The Cure combine sublime pop and heartfelt expressivity like no other band. As the group's only constant member, Smith richly deserves his due.

TOP TRACK: 'FRIDAY I'M IN LOVE'

KEVIN SHIELDS

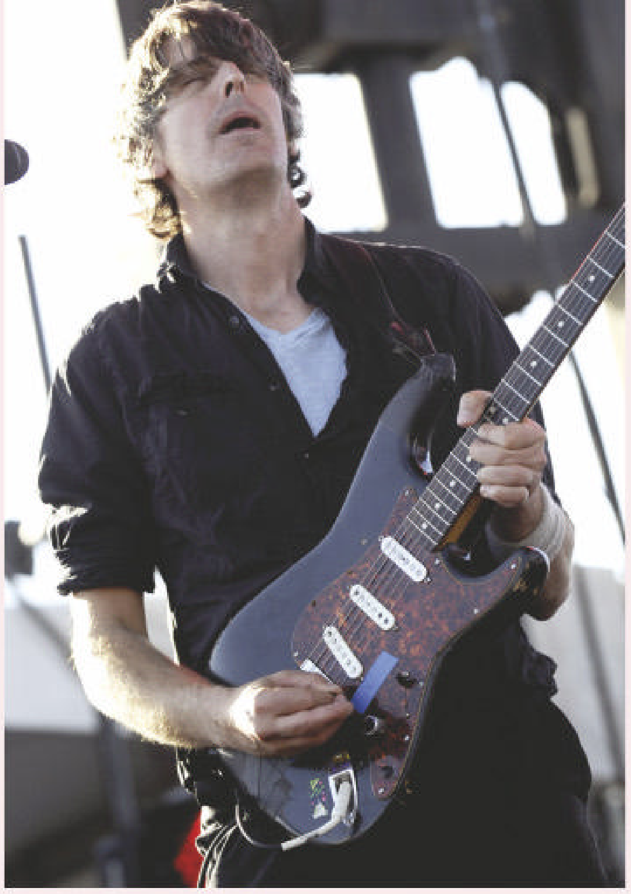
ALT-ROCK'S DALI

Where other guitarists have bags of technique, Kevin Shields has originality. As the leader of My Bloody Valentine, he led the group through a pair of albums – 1988's *Isn't Anything* and 1991's *Loveless* – that remain alt-rock cornerstones and ground zero for shoegaze. But it was on their 1990 EP, *You Made Me Realise*, that Shields found his secret weapon.

Wielding a borrowed 1964 Fender Jazzmaster with a tremolo, he discovered he could use the device to make his notes warble and drop. Applying backward reverb, he created waves of sound that made the whole production teeter woozily as if in a dreamscape. The resulting "glide guitar" became his plaything. "It was like a new toy, really," he says. Shields influenced many other alt-rock mainstays – including Dinosaur Jr's J Mascis and Smashing Pumpkins' Billy Corgan – and went on to work with numerous acts, from Yo La Tengo to Patti Smith.

No less than Vernon Reid declared of him, "He achieved a wholeness and a unity. He created his own sound." In doing so, he tremendously expanded guitar's sonic palette for everyone else.

TOP TRACK: 'SLOW'



STEPHEN MALKMUS

ANOTHER JUBILANT SOUNDTRACK MAKER

Stephen Malkmus will always be most associated with the skewed, slacker indie-rock sound he spearheaded with Pavement in the 1990s. The seminal Californian art rockers were the lords of lo-fi, and their abrasive yet tuneful, abstract and ironic humour have cast a long shadow over alternative rock ever since. Central to the group's sound and style was Malkmus' dissonant chords, economical but vibrant melodies – often executed with alternate tunings – and oddball stylings that emphasised personality over skill.

Their 1992 studio debut, *Slanted And Enchanted*, remains an alt-rock landmark, but Malkmus has continued his greatness apart from Pavement with his band The Jicks, as a solo artist and as a collaborator with acts like Silver Jews. His latest release, 2020's *Traditional Techniques*, is another left turn, on which he combines 12-string guitar with non-Western instruments from the Balkans, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Persia.

"I'm not saying it's traditional music," Malkmus explains, "but we do use some traditional instruments. And maybe we're using them to come up with something new." No surprise there.

TOP TRACK: 'RATTLED BY THE RUSH'

JOEY SANTIAGO

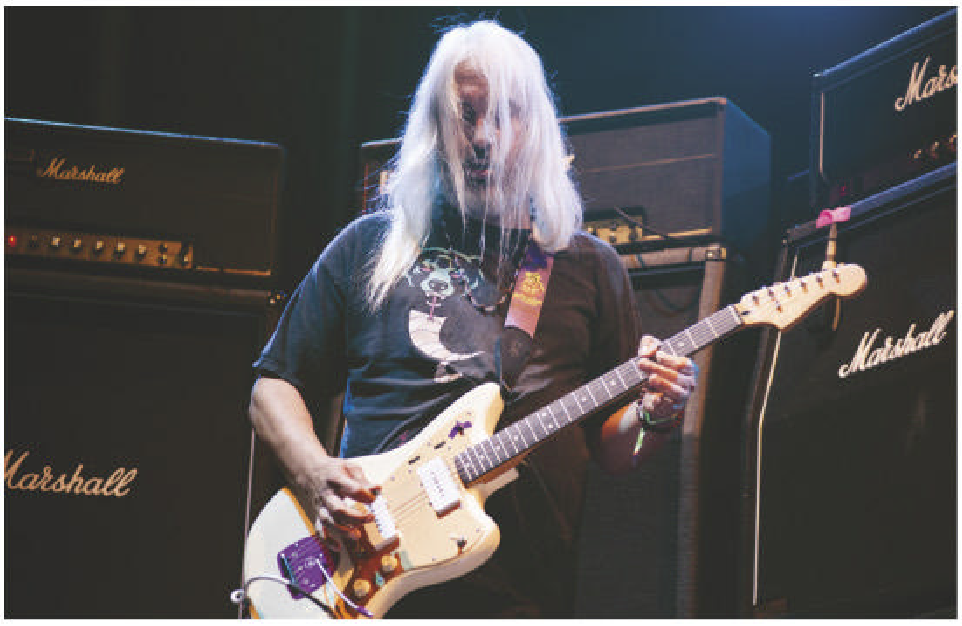
THE CALM AFTER THE STORM

His jarring guitar shrieks, grating leads and anti-solo eruptions were unlike anything else when he showed up as the Pixies' lead guitarist on the late-'80s albums *Come On Pilgrim* and *Surfer Rosa*. Joey Santiago's contribution was a key part of the group's loud-quiet-loud dynamic, adding tension to calm moments that foretold the cataclysm to come.

"I wanted to be in a weird band, and I got really lucky when I hooked up with Charles," he says, referring to Pixies frontman and co-guitarist Charles Thompson (aka Black Francis), whom he met in 1986 while the two attended the University of Massachusetts Amherst. From the start he made it clear he hated guitar solos – though, oddly, he cites Wes Montgomery, Brian May and Elliot Easton among his heroes.

His own playing draws more from the work of another source of inspiration: Jimi Hendrix. "It was all very emotional and intuitive," he says of Hendrix's guitar playing – and his own. "I rely on vibe now. I think it lends more immediacy to what I do."

TOP TRACK: 'VAMOS'



J MASCIS

THE DYNAMO OF OVERDRIVEN OVERDRIVE

With J Mascis, it's less about the playing and more about the tone. Everything about it is massive, thick and buzzing with activity, like the wall of a cyclone bearing down on you. Which is not to say Dinosaur Jr's music is impenetrable. Favourites like 'Little Fury Things', 'Yeah We Know' and 'Pond Song', with its pretty fingerpicked riff, ring with a plangent despair that underscores the frustration expressed in their lyrics.

"My whole style is just to keep playing," Mascis says, "because I'm playing so loud and with all this fuzz, and if you stop playing it's just insane [amp] noise. So I just keep playing to make it sound like something." It must work – Mascis has been welcomed as a guest on tracks by groups ranging from Sonic Youth to The Lemonheads to Cobra Verde to Mike Watt and fIREHOSE, while Dinosaur Jr remains a going concern nearly 40 years on.

TOP TRACK: 'START CHOPPIN''

BOB MOULD

THE PETE TOWNSHEND OF ALT-ROCK

Starting out as a fast-and-furious hardcore act, Hüsker Dü crossed over to alternative rock when Bob Mould invested their punk-rock with melody, acoustic folk and psychedelia for 1984's *Zen Arcade*. With its ambitious soundscape and rock opera storyline about a young runaway, the album brought a sense of rough-hewn grandeur to the fledgling alt-rock genre.

"The '80s was really a special time in music," the guitarist explains. "We all really wanted to change people's ideas of what music could be." Central to Mould's furious guitar tone were Flying V-style guitars, including an Ibanez Rocket Roll Jr, and an MXR Distortion Plus, which he used to fill every inch of Hüsker Dü's sonic space.

"When you're in a three-piece and it's a guitar/bass/drums configuration, everybody has to carry a lot of weight," he says. "We just wanted to create as big a wall of sound as possible." Mould's music would ultimately influence the Pixies, Nirvana and Foo Fighters, while he plowed new sonic territory with Sugar before going solo in 1996.

TOP TRACK: 'EXPLODE AND MAKE UP'

KURT COBAIN

THE BOY WITH THE THORN IN HIS SIDE

Much has been made of Nirvana's timing, mostly how the dive-bombing and strutting hair-metal din that had wailed from LA since the second half of the 1980s was decisively silenced by 1991's *Nevermind*. That was a great story for music journalists covering the impact of the band's second album and the emergence of Seattle's grunge scene as a whole at the time. But the deeper truth for many guitar players offers something more than merely pitting subgenres of rock against each other.

For a generation of players, Kurt Cobain emerged as a worldwide star at a crucial point in their development. When you're first coming to grips with the guitar, the sheer enormity of possibilities can be the very thing that drives you away. Kurt's songs offered accessibility for budding guitarists, with an energy and force we could aspire to, and be inspired by. And his intense live performances with bassist Krist Novoselic, drummer Dave Grohl – and later, second guitarist Pat Smear – proved the point.

He was not an overnight sensation. How many guitar players ever are? The instrument takes time and dedication. Kurt served his time, taking the first tentative steps in his bedroom in Aberdeen, Washington with the electric his uncle Chuck had given him for his 14th birthday; taking a month of guitar lessons and learning his first riff (AC/DC's 'Back In Black'); and roughing it in a freezing van in North America touring Nirvana's debut, *Bleach*. It was the pursuit of a dream to communicate his music to others.

But misconceptions about his guitar playing remain. Kurt Cobain didn't kill off the solo, and he wasn't guitar's revolutionary anti-hero. Instead, the energy and immediacy of his talent brought an integrity back to the mainstream that cut to the very heart of what makes rock and roll such a visceral force.

"His playing was misunderstood," notes Earnie Bailey, the guitar tech who worked closely with Kurt through much of his Nirvana touring career. "He was more advanced than he revealed, and his minimalist playing was more about subtracting the notes and clichés he disliked and working with what's left."

That remainder adds up to a compelling legacy. Just as Cobain was inspired by everyone from Buzz Osborne to Ace Frehley and Black Francis, there are countless players he inspired, and there continues to be. Almost 30 years after his passing, that influence resonates as much as every power chord and discordant lead on Nirvana's records.

TOP TRACK: 'ALL APOLOGIES'

18+

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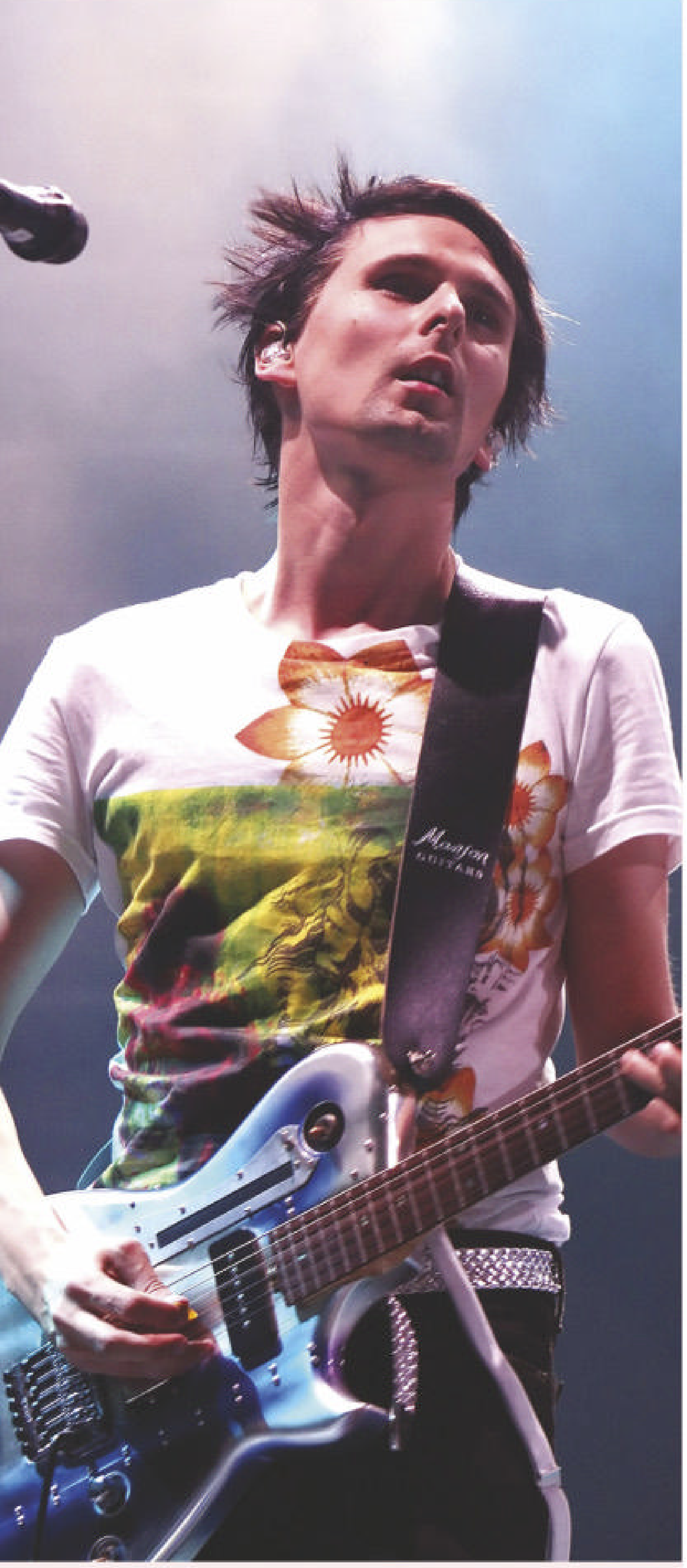


MATT BELLAMY

TECH-SAVVY FRONTMAN FOR ONE OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST ROCK BANDS

You know you're onto something when Brian May is among your fans. The Queen guitarist has called UK alt-rockers Muse "extraordinary musicians" who "let their madness show through". Both descriptions fit guitarist Matt Bellamy, who is famous for his tech-loaded, forward-thinking approach to the electric guitar. His Manson guitars have features like the Roland GK MIDI pickup system, built-in effects pedals, LED lights, Fernandes Sustainer pickups, ribbon MIDI controllers, Kaoss pad controllers and plenty more.

Despite the high-tech sonic influences, Bellamy's love of traditional classical music permeates Muse's music. That said, he acknowledges that alt-rock's landscape has changed dramatically from the group's 1990's heyday. But he can cope just fine. "The guitar has become a textural instrument rather than a lead instrument," he told the BBC in 2018. "And I think that's probably a good thing."

TOP TRACK: 'PLUG IN BABY'

DOUG MARTSCH

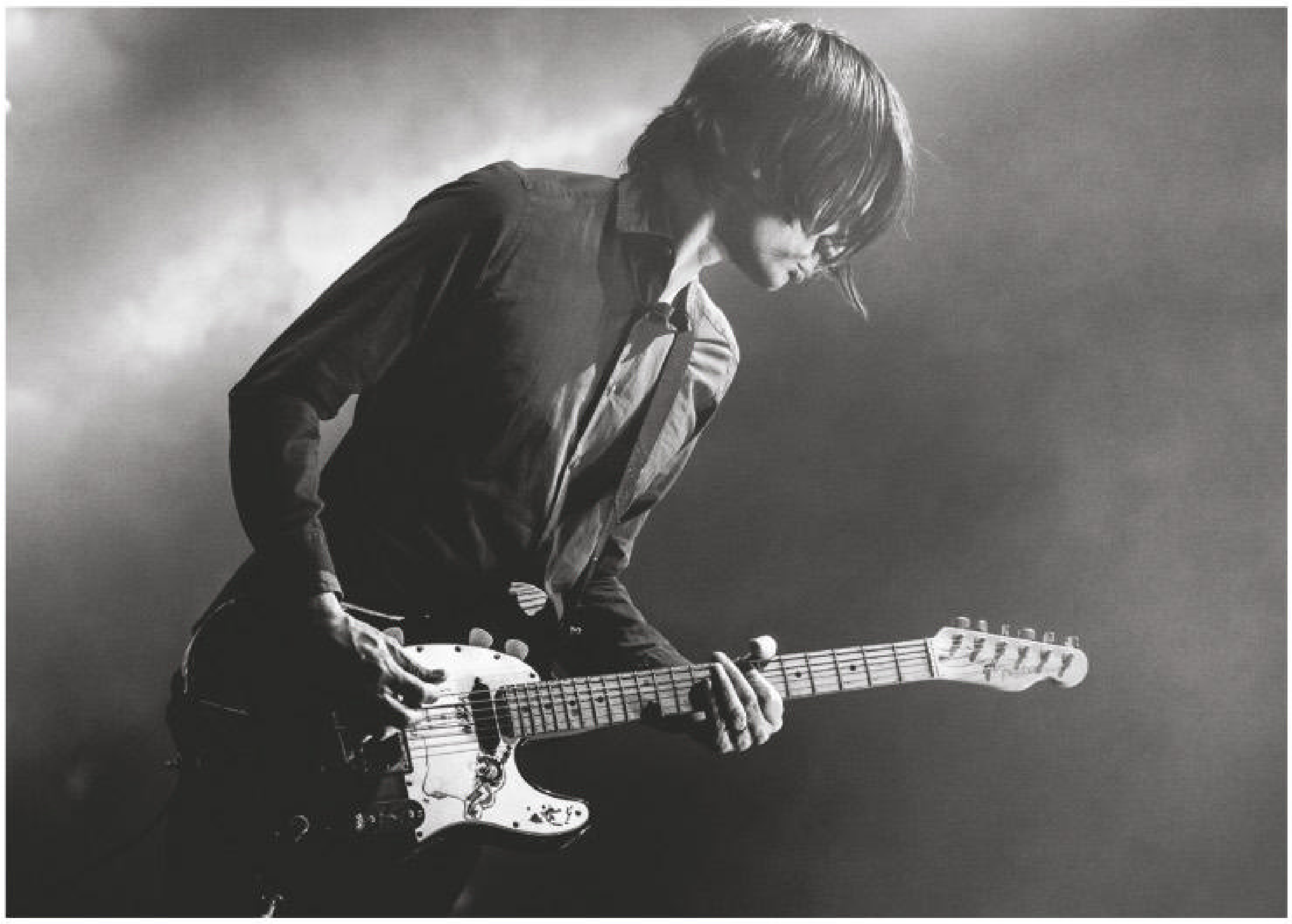
ALT-ROCK'S BALANCING ACT

Keep It Like A Secret, Built To Spill's 1999 album, was their second for a major label. Despite producing zero singles, it remains one of alt-rock's defining guitar albums, stuffed with riffs, arpeggios and solos, each catchier than the last and all of them cascading into each other.

"It's ambitious, and I like that about it. But that's also the thing I don't like," says Doug Martsch, Built To Spill's singer, guitarist and sole constant member. "I added a lot of things more to cover up myself than to make it big sounding."

Some 20 years later, Martsch says he aims for the heart of the song when playing *Keep It Like A Secret* live, piecing together a melodic through-line from beneath all the swirling layers of fretwork. "There's this balance in music where things need to be conventional, be pleasant to the brain and kind of make sense, but also be challenging," he says. "That's just what you're constantly trying to figure out: what things are cool, and crucial, and what parts take the listener out of the song."

TOP TRACK: 'CARRY THE ZERO'



JONNY GREENWOOD

EVERYTHING IN ITS RIGHT PLACE

It's hard to play like Jonny Greenwood and it's even harder to write like him. His parts aren't confined to conventional shapes and patterns, so he produces arresting and unexpected sounds. His most famous four seconds – the percussive stabs before the chorus of 'Creep' – began as his attempt to ruin a song he hated and ended up as the track's signature moment.

For the rest of his career, he has been similarly fearless about shaking things up. No doubt his approach on guitar is informed by his fluency on other instruments, including piano, viola, drums and the ondes Martenot, an early synthesiser. Experimenting freely with avant-garde, modern classical and jazz influences, Greenwood either sidesteps clichés or recontextualises them so they sound fresh again.

TOP TRACK: 'PARANOID ANDROID'

BRIAN AUBERT

CARRYING THE TORCH FOR GRUNGE

The heyday of grunge may be 30 years in the past, but the genre lives on in spirit and sound in Silversun Pickups. The LA quartet formed in 2000 as the sun set on alt-rock's greatest commercial era, and then went on to revive the genre with their 2006 smash hit, 'Lazy Eye'. From guitarist Brian Aubert's super-fuzzy guitar tone to bassist Nikki Monninger, Silversun Pickups might bring to mind The Smashing Pumpkins – they even recorded 2019's *Widow's Weeds* with *Siamese Dream* producer Butch Vig – but their influences go back much further.

"I always think that because Sonic Youth and My Bloody Valentine exist, we are not weird," Aubert said during their early brush with fame in 2007. "We're a pop band because of them." Like Kevin Shields, Aubert imbues the band's music with an atmosphere of psychedelic melodies and classic punk-influenced riffage delivered on a wave of fuzzy, textural guitars – typically an Epiphone Sheraton – through a battalion of effects pedals.

"I and the rest of the band do like it when the guitar is used as a texture and less as a guitar in itself," Aubert explained. "We like making the guitar sound like a keyboard a lot of the times."

TOP TRACK: 'PANIC SWITCH'

GRAHAM COXON

RULE BREAKER, RISK TAKER

As the shy, unassuming guitarist for Blur in the 1990s, Graham Coxon imbued the group's Britpop with urgent riffs, glorious leads and hooks that other guitarists would gladly hang entire careers from. Playing mostly Telecasters through Marshalls, he uses distortion devastatingly, yet somehow never sounds the same. Like a shapeshifting wizard, he gives the music exactly what it needs.

Though his work with Blur alone would place him on this list, he's shown greater diversity in his solo career, where he's explored lo-fi punk, power-pop and even Albion folk. His playing has earned him raves from producers like Stephen Street, the former knob twiddler for The Smiths who called Johnny Marr and Coxon "among the best guitarists in the world."

Coxon holds a more modest opinion of his talents. "I think I'm more in the free-jazz world when it comes to lead playing, and I play physically," he says. "I like the sound of a guitar being thumped. I'd hear other people making rock albums that sounded really polished, but my records always sound like me: slightly shambolic and about to break. I cover my lack of technical ability with weird noises."

TOP TRACK: 'COFFEE & TV'

NELS CLINE

TECHNICAL MASTERY IN THE SERVICE OF RAW EXPRESSION

Nels Cline is one of the most daring and creative guitarists working today. Armed with a phalanx of noise-making devices and a finely honed instinct for improvisation, he's pushed back the boundaries of what the guitar is sonically capable of.

As well as his fine work with Chicago alt-rockers Wilco, Nels has followed in John Scofield's footsteps as guitarmeister in the pioneering jazz outfit Medeski, Martin & Wood, and worked with countless artists, including Mike Watt and Thurston Moore. Through it all, he's shown an uncanny ability to improvise without descending into jam-band territory.

"I think listening is always the key," he says. "Certainly, one needs to have familiarity with the language of music making, or whatever the vocabulary of your instrument is. But beyond that, I think musicians who can play, and have the ability to do what we might call 'deep listening' while they're playing, are capable of coming up with sounds very much like very organised music, but that doesn't stay in one place too long."

TOP TRACK: 'IMPOSSIBLE GERMANY'

ALBERT HAMMOND JR. AND NICK VALENSI

A POTENT PAIRING THAT LAUNCHED A THOUSAND COPYCAT BANDS

20 years have passed since The Strokes released their debut, *This Is It*, so it's easy to forget the album's impact on alternative rock and guitar tone. As The Strokes' guitar tandem, Albert Hammond Jr. and Nick Valensi blur the lines between rhythm and lead with their angular playing and twin single-note lines. Valensi has favoured hollowbody electrics like the Epiphone Riviera, while Hammond prefers his 1985 '70s-reissue Fender Stratocaster in Olympic White.

These went into a minimalist setup involving Fender DeVille combos, played loud with a little breakup. Played without accompaniment, such brightness would be pure ice pick, but as a complement to Julian Casablancas's slightly nasal, kinda over it vocal delivery, it has proven exquisite. At once they were referencing the treble-forward jangle of classic American indie and garage rock, and yet they sounded so fresh, proving that it is hard to sound stale when you put so much treble in your guitar sound.

TOP TRACK: 'THE ADULTS ARE TALKING'

KURT VILE

LUSCIOUSLY LAIDBACK AND LO-FI

Kurt Vile's tracks shimmer with layers of acoustic and heavily effected electric guitars, a sonically rich and occasionally hazy soundscape that provides a warm, engulfing backdrop to his laconic vocal delivery. Listen closely, though, and you'll hear plenty of engaging guitar melodies that could carry his songs all on their own.

"I like blues licks and melodic folk-tinged riffs," Vile told *Guitar Player* in December 2018. "They've got to be melodic, a little bit pretty, but with the blues in there. I like to make them as hypnotic and as melodic as possible. I get lost in most of the riffs that I find myself coming back to."

And unlike nearly everyone on this list, Vile makes acoustic guitars the heart of his alt-rock approach. "If I had to pick a main tool, it would be the acoustic guitar," he says. "In fact, certain electric guitars that I fall in love with, I won't plug them in for days after I get them. I'll just sit on the couch and listen to how they sound acoustically and how they feel. I like the idea of hearing all the nuances. Acoustically, you can't beat that."

TOP TRACK: 'WAKIN ON A PRETTY DAY'

ST. VINCENT

RESHAPING THE GUITAR IN BOTH FORM AND FUNCTION

Annie Clark is perhaps the most beguiling guitarist to emerge in the past 20 years. The artist known as St. Vincent makes music that is a collision of adept, otherworldly guitar arrangements and propulsive electronica, a mix that has made her a leading light of the alt-rock movement's genre-subverting strain.

A Berklee grad inspired to learn guitar by grunge acts like Nirvana and Soundgarden, Clark debuted her genre-bending approach on 2007's *Marry Me*, kicking off a career that has had its fair share of success and critical acclaim. Her eponymous 2014 record brought her a Grammy Award for Best Alternative Album (the first won by a solo female artist in 20 years).

She seems poised to repeat that honour with her latest release, 2021's *Daddy's Home*. The nominated album was recorded partly during lockdown and made with no expectations. "It was truly just having so much fun playing music," Clark says. "I'd go in and sing a song in my studio, just for fun, just, 'Oh, I wonder how my voice is going to sound today,' and the same with putting guitar parts down, just playing for fun and joy. That's emblematic of the whole process.

"It's not that any record is easy to make, because it's not," she adds. "But a lot of times the strife in the process is you getting in your own way and not some literal external force. It's the ego games and self-loathing circus that gets in the way."

That sort of effortlessness seems a hallmark of Clark's career, including the creation of her Ernie Ball signature guitar. After visiting the company's factory in spring 2015, she recalls, "I sat down with Sterling [Ball] and he said, 'Why don't you design a guitar?' Really, the guitar that I drew up on that first day is very similar to what ended up making the final cut. There were definitely tweaks back and forth to make sure the ergonomics were correct – the balance was correct, to whittle down as much of the weight as possible without sacrificing the tone. I couldn't believe that it was that easy. And with my vision and their skills combined, I think we made a really great guitar."

TOP TRACK: 'CHLOE IN THE AFTERNOON'

JACK WHITE

FROM BLUES CRUSADER TO ALT-ROCK OBSESSIVE

As the driving force behind The White Stripes, White rebooted the blues for the post-grunge era. The ethos was simple: Take drummer Meg's kit, one beat-up amplifier and a barely in-tune guitar, and let it rip. The group's thudding mix of blues, punk and metal ("I don't trust anybody who doesn't like Led Zeppelin," White once declared) laid the groundwork for his eclectic career. Since the Stripes parted ways, he's branched out with the more pop-oriented Raconteurs and the goth-blues supergroup The Dead Weather, as well as with his own solo releases.

His life and work remain heavy with dizzying musical ideas, all of which he undertakes and performs with a passion that draws his audience to his obsession. "There aren't that many things left that haven't already been done, especially with music," he explains. "I'm interested in ideas that can shake us all up."

TOP TRACK: 'BALL AND BISCUIT'

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FRETTING AND PICKING ACCURACY

THE CORE OF ANY TECHNIQUE WORKOUT IS MAKING YOUR FINGERS MOVE MORE EFFICIENTLY. OUR EXERCISES WILL HELP.

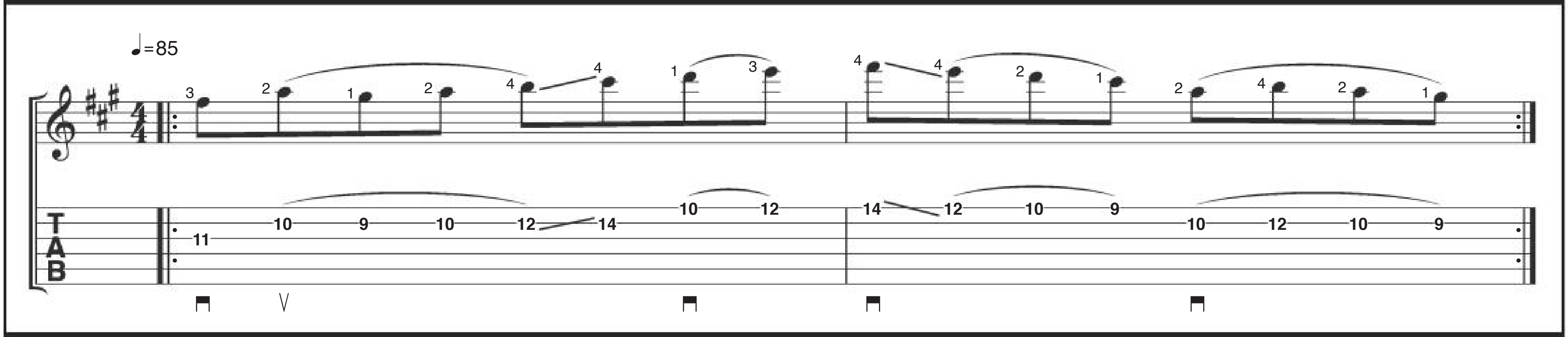
When most people think of a guitar workout, they inevitably think of 'getting faster', but this can be a fool's errand. Winding up the speed on your metronome might not do you any good in the long run if you aren't playing accurately – you'll just end up playing sloppily quickly. It's important to keep in mind that speed is a byproduct of accuracy. These exercises will improve your dexterity and accuracy, which will in turn allow you to play faster. Work through the examples slowly and only increase the speed when you can play an exercise ten times without error.

SPIDER EXERCISES

This classic four-finger workout spider exercise is probably already in your practice routine – the idea is to play notes at consecutive frets using all four fretting fingers. You'll be honing your alternate picking technique too. The most common approach is: first finger, then second, third, and fourth, but try these variations too.

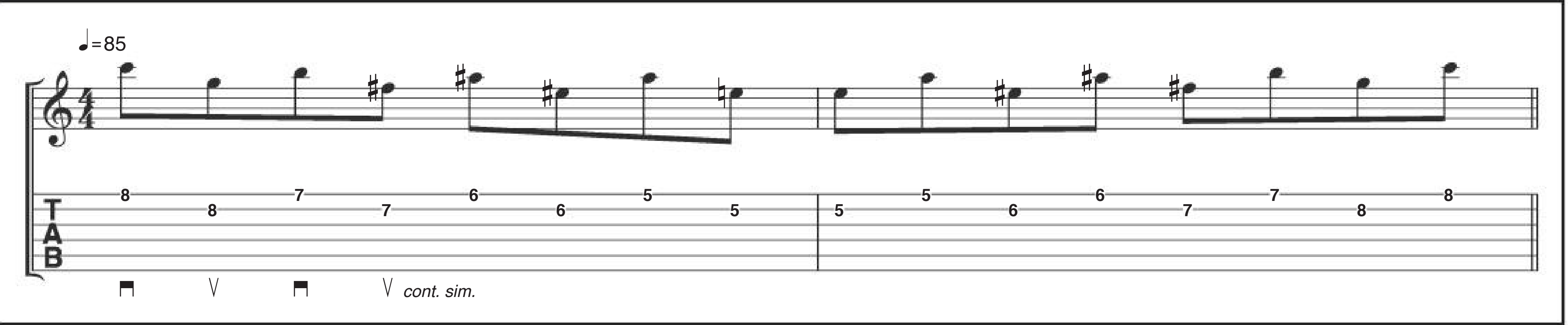
1. 4-3-2-1 1-2-3-4
2. 4-2-3-1 1-3-2-4
3. 3-2-4-1 1-4-2-3
4. 2-1-4-3 3-4-1-2

LEGATO WORKOUT



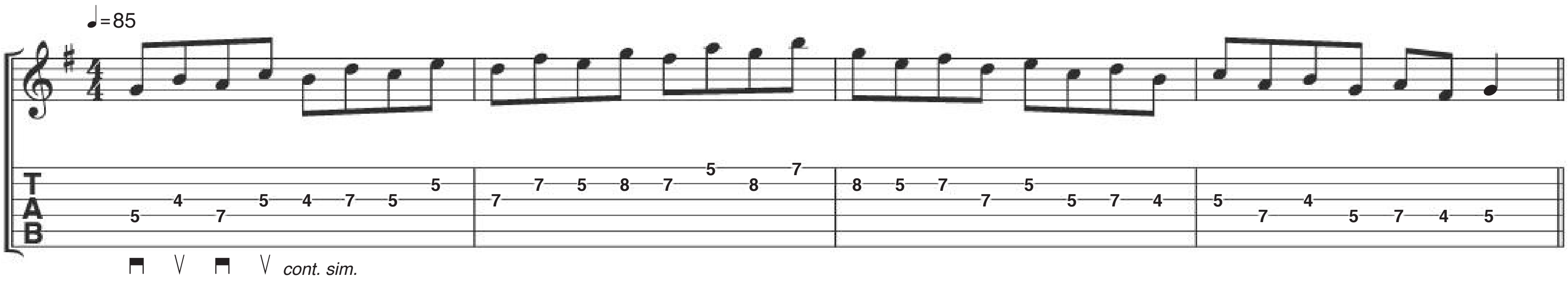
A fret-hand technique, legato refers to the use of hammer-ons and pull-offs instead of picking every note. It can seem easy, but it's important to be able to make every note roughly the same volume, whether picked or not. Try our exercise taking careful note of which notes are picked.

FINGER ROLLS



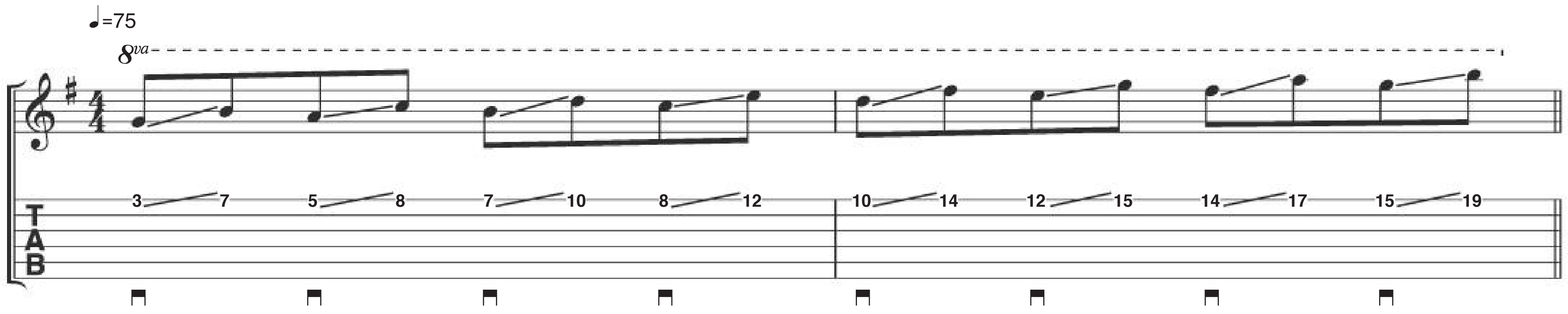
Playing the same fret on adjacent strings is a tricky move – especially if you don't want the notes to bleed into each other. Play the first note here with the pad of your finger then 'roll' onto the tip to play the second note. Do the opposite for the second half of the exercise.

MAJOR SCALE IN 3RDS



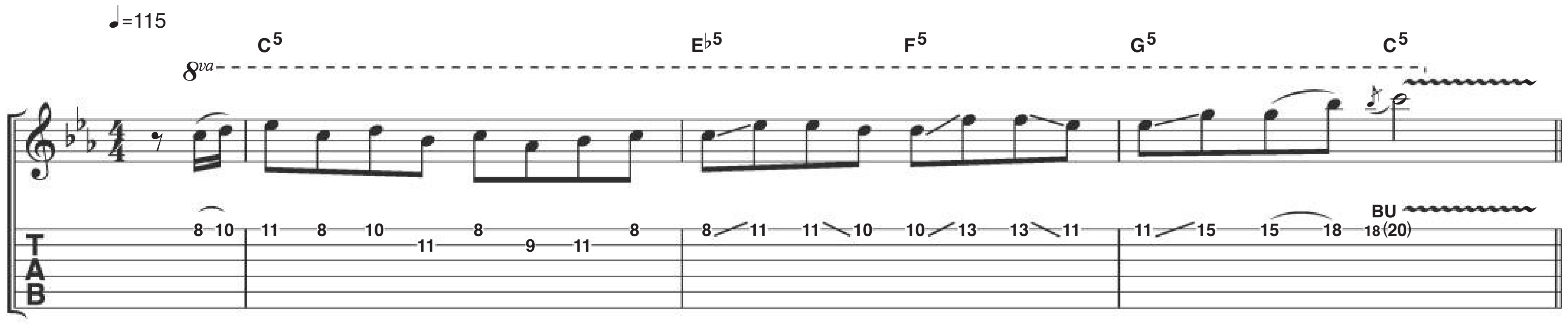
Running up and down scales has its place, but playing them using intervals (3rd, 4ths and 5ths) will improve your dexterity, keep you on your toes and provide new ideas for licks. Don't get what we mean? Listen to the audio track and you'll hear how we've made this pattern out of the major scale.

MAJOR SCALE IN 3RDS ON ONE STRING



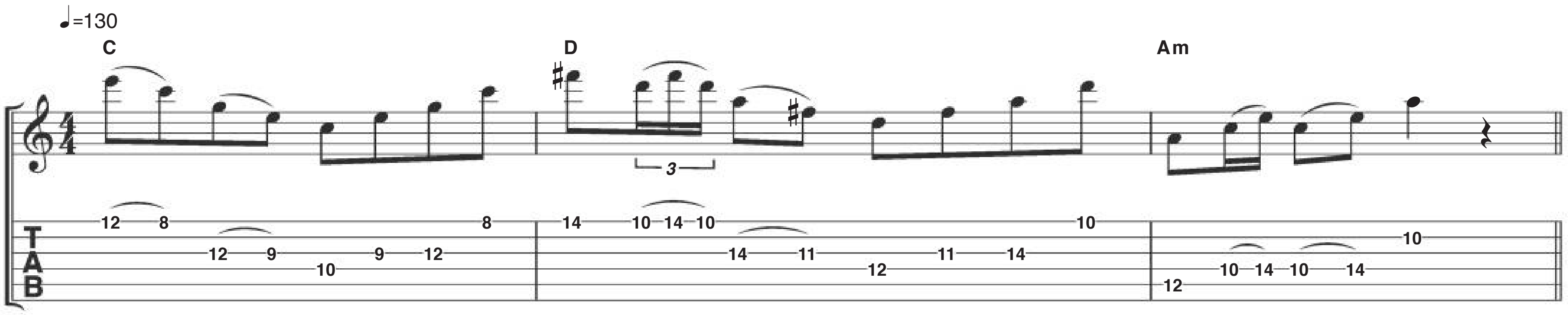
Scales don't just have to be played across multiple strings; this exercise shows you how to use legato to play the major scale on a single string. As always, aim for a smooth, even sound and remember to try it with other intervals.

LICK WITH 3RDS AND A SINGLE-STRING RUN



We've switched to the natural minor scale here to show you how to use the interval exercises in the previous example on a different scale *and* to create a cool lick. Notice how the single-string phrase helps the lick build to an exciting climax.

STRING SKIPPING ARPEGGIOS



Arpeggios fall naturally onto adjacent strings and often played this way – sometimes with sweep picking. Arranging arpeggios into this string skipping sequence gives you more phrasing options and greater control over dynamics.

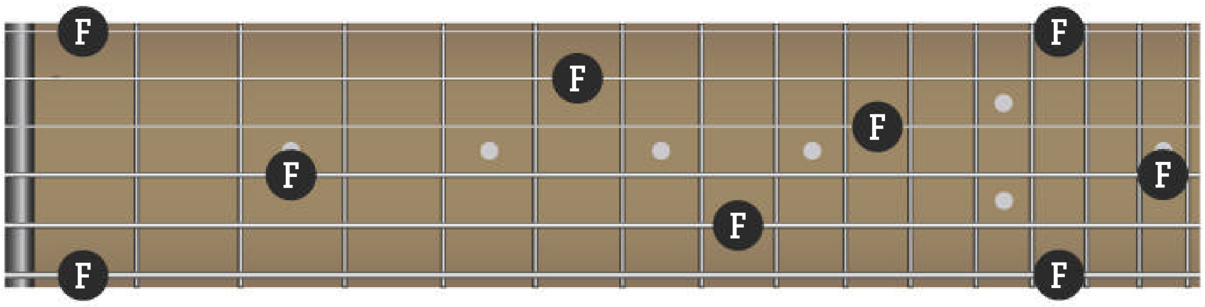
FRETBOARD KNOWLEDGE

MAP OUT THE NOTES ON THE GUITAR AND YOU'LL BE FLYING 'ROUND THE FRETBOARD BEFORE YOU KNOW IT!

Moving freely around the fretboard is a goal many guitarists share. Knowing which note you're playing at any time, where you can move to next or which notes will sound good against a song's chords will help you take your playing to a new level. We'll start here with some essential info to help you improve your fretboard knowledge before moving on to some practical applications of this new knowledge. While we have demonstrated some concepts here, it is not enough to just play through them. The idea is for you to create your own licks and solos to build these skills so they integrate seamlessly into your playing.

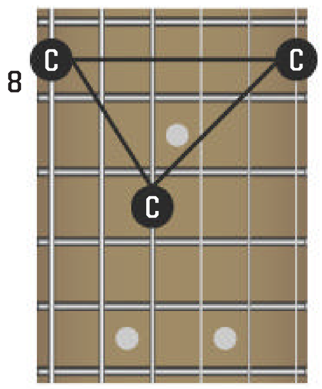
LEARN THE NOTES ON THE FRETBOARD

Lots of people learn notes by moving up a single string. This doesn't really work as you only learn the notes as a sequence rather than identifying them in isolation. Instead, select a note (we've gone for F) and find it in every location in the neck. Make sure to explore above the 15th fret too and repeat the exercise with different notes. For instance, try finding all the G notes.

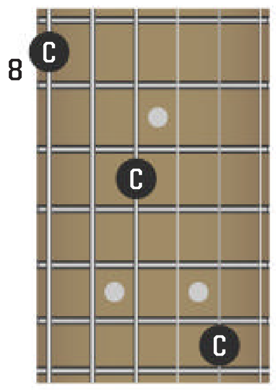


IDENTIFY OCTAVE SHAPES

Once you've covered individual notes, it's time to move to octaves. This will help you move licks and phrases into different registers. Lots of people like the triangle method shown here. This is good for helping find root notes, but not so great for transposing licks, so we've shown an alternative – it doesn't have a fancy name, but is worth memorising.



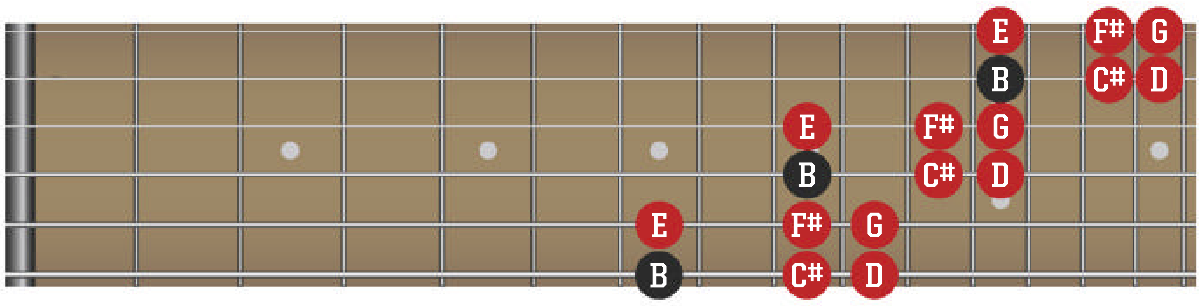
Octaves: triangle method



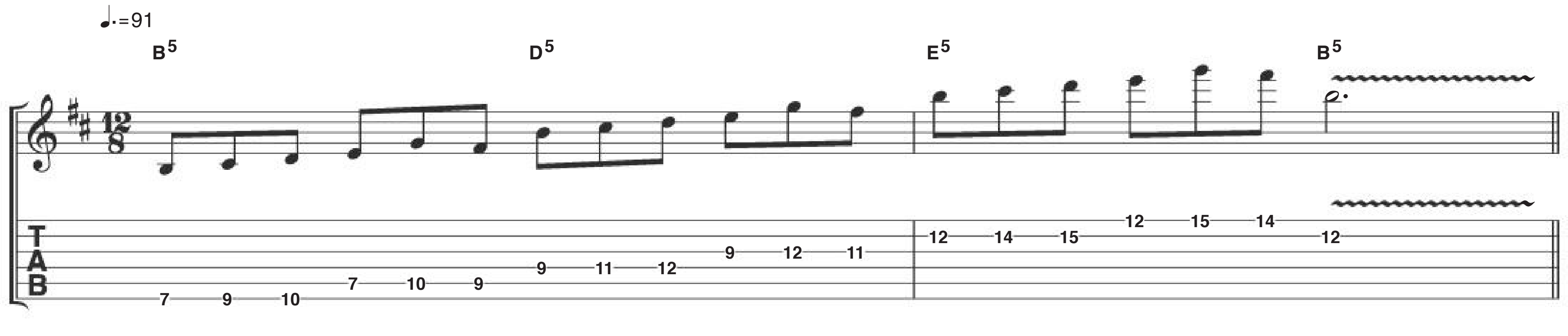
Octaves: alternative method

IDENTIFY OCTAVE SHAPES

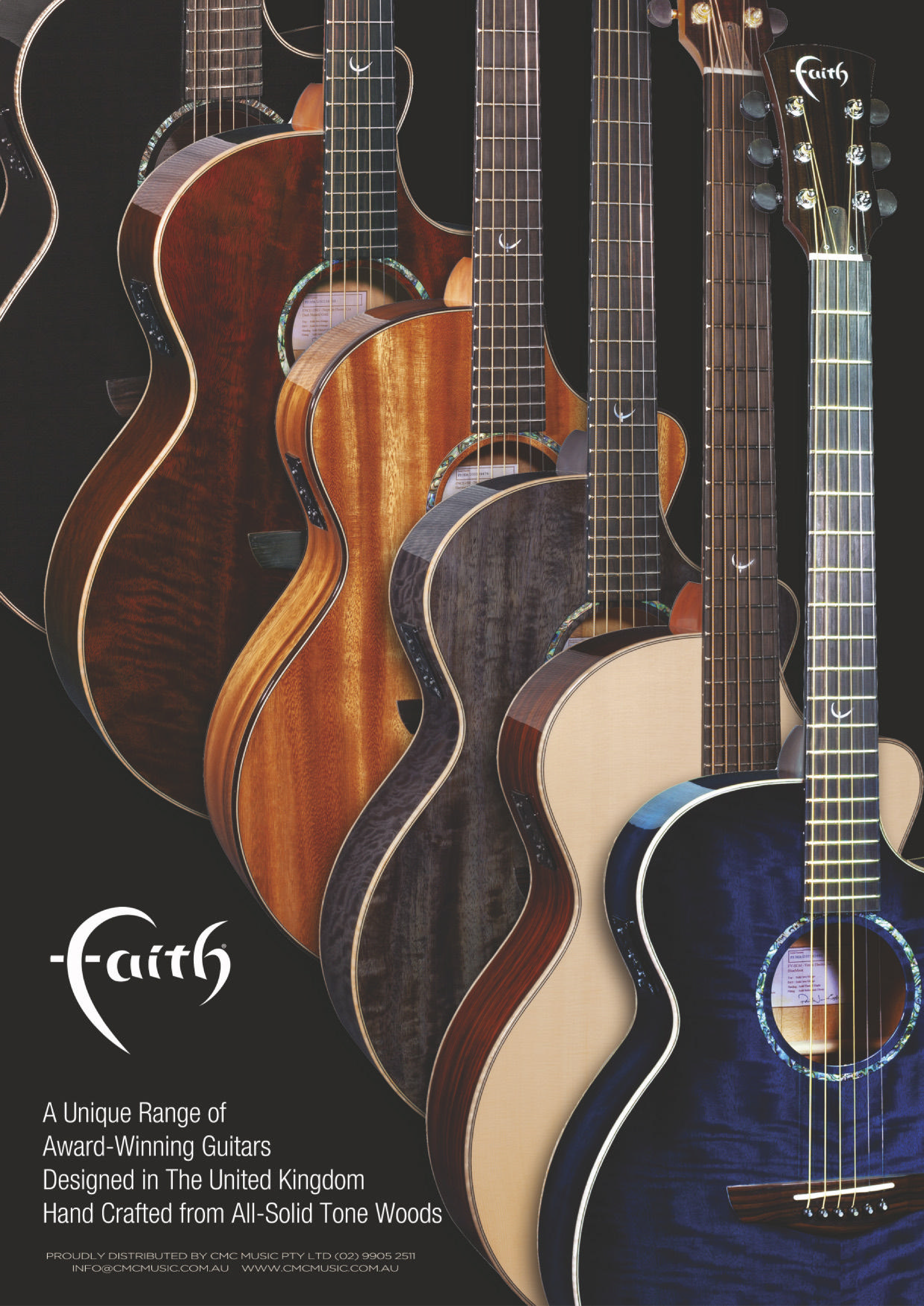
The lick below shows how easy shifting a sequence into different octaves is. It is the perfect device for building a solo from low notes to a high melody. This scale box gives you a visual representation of how we pieced our lick together.



MOVING OCTAVE LICK



Playing the same fret on adjacent strings is a tricky move – especially if you don't want the notes to bleed into each other. Play the first note here with the pad of your finger then 'roll' onto the tip to play the second note. Do the opposite for the second half of the exercise.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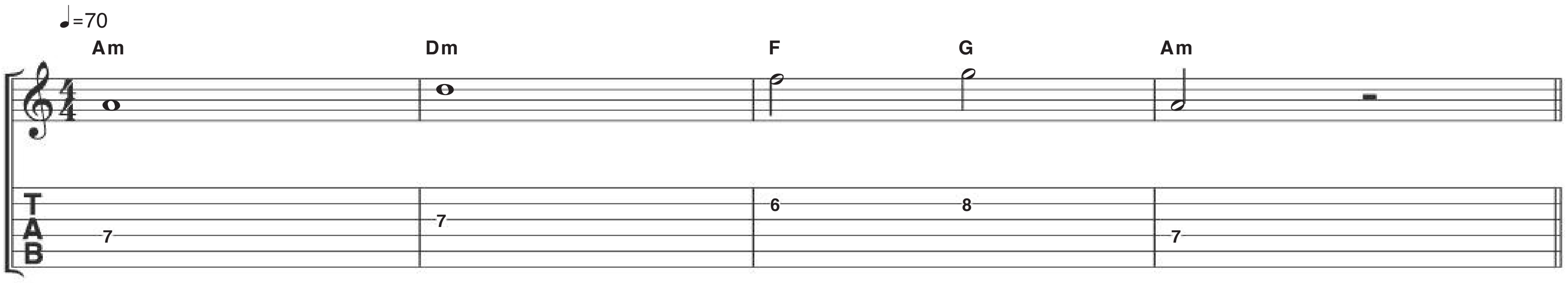
PLAYING THROUGH CHANGES

FOLLOW THESE SHORTCUTS AND FIND THE RIGHT NOTES FOR YOUR SOLOS EVERY TIME YOU PLAY.

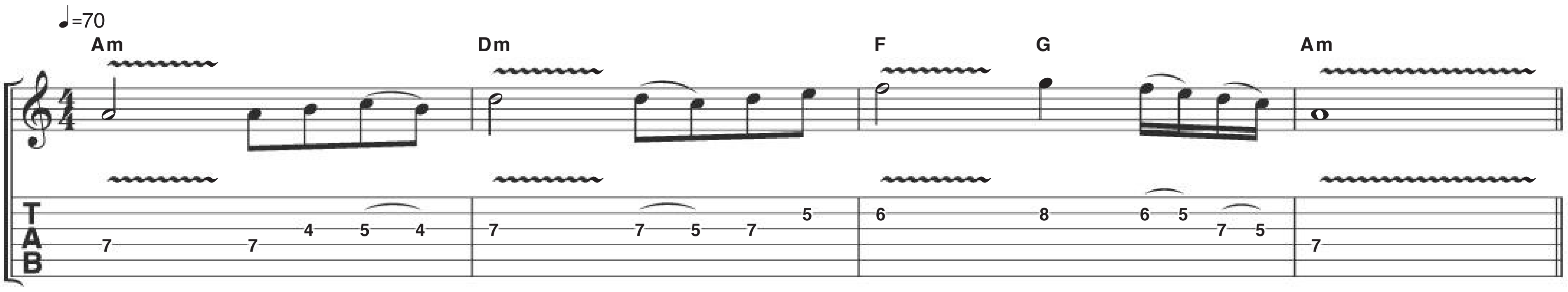
Most people know the scale's root note is a good place to finish a phrase, but wouldn't it be great if you could play something that effortlessly fits against whatever chord is playing? This is called playing through the [chord] changes. Getting started can be an intimidating task, especially if you've ever witnessed a jazz virtuoso ripping it seamlessly over fast, complex chords. Like every skill it can be built over time from simple concepts that anyone can understand and use. We're going to take you step-by-step through the basics so you can think on your feet and create intelligent, considered solos.

PLAY THE ROOT NOTE AS THE CHORD CHANGES



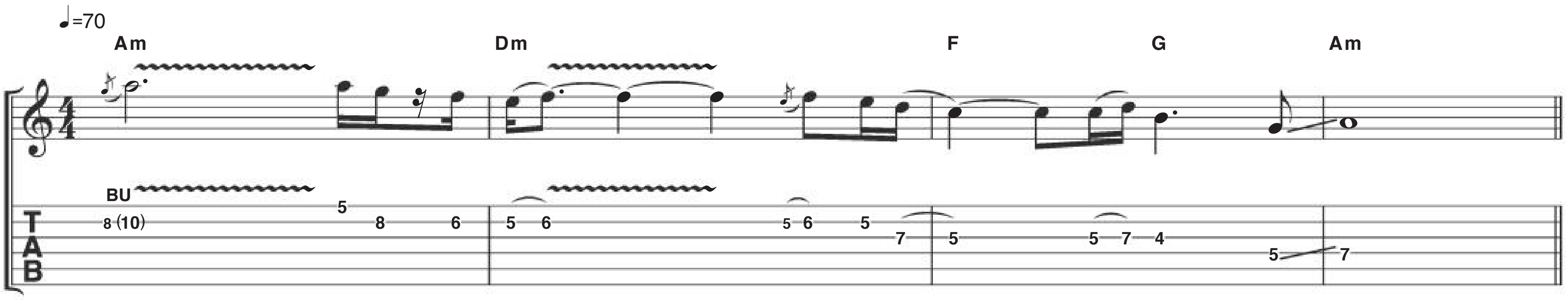
This first step is really quite simple. Simply change note as the chords change. This gives you an idea of when to change (you're following the chords, remember!) and which note to use (the chord's root note). Don't worry if this seems simple. This is a framework that you can build upon.

CONNECT THE DOTS



Next, you're going to make your playing more musical by playing phrases that connect the root notes. It's important that you try this for yourself once you've played through our example. We're in the key of A minor, so we're using the A natural minor scale.

SEAMLESS SOLOING

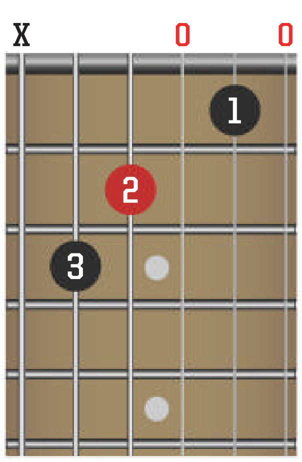


This example uses the other chord tones to stop the phrase sounding mechanical by avoiding big jumps. The first note of each bar is one of the chord tones shown in the diagram above. As before, play this example then try writing your own lick.

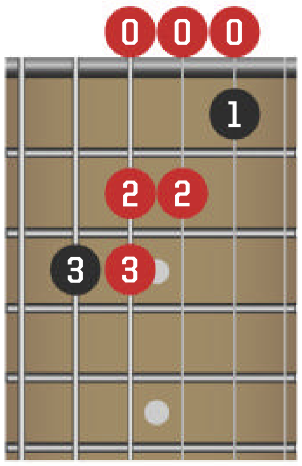
CHORDS & SCALES

Some chords and scales are almost identical. You can use this to your advantage...

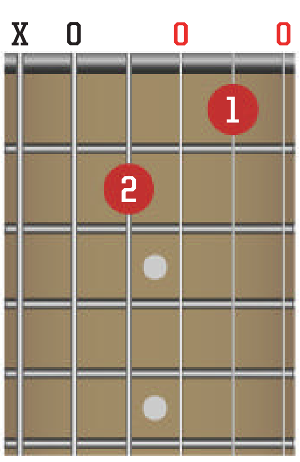
The C major scale shape shown here adds a few notes to the C chord. In fact, they're so similar that you'll nearly always be able to use the scale over the chord and know that they'll match up. It's the same with the A minor pentatonic scale and this Am7 chord. They share so many notes that you can nearly always make them work together, adding tonnes of flexibility to your playing.



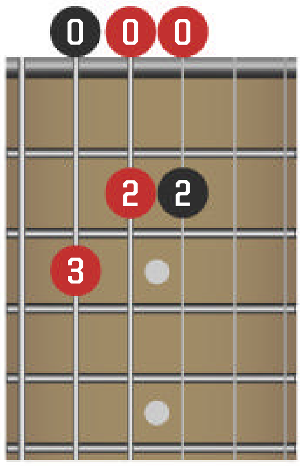
C



C major scale



Am7



A minor pentatonic

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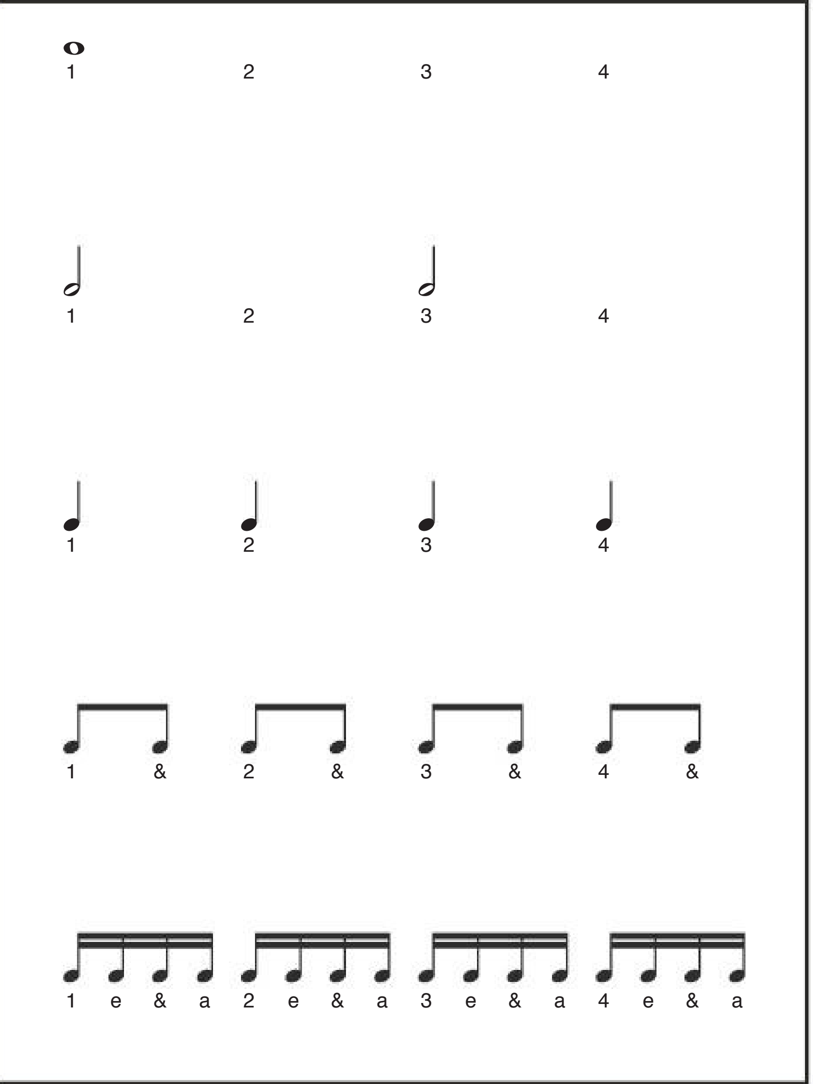
LEARN TO READ RHYTHMS

CRACK THE CODE OF MUSIC NOTATION AND YOUR RHYTHM PLAYING WILL IMPROVE.

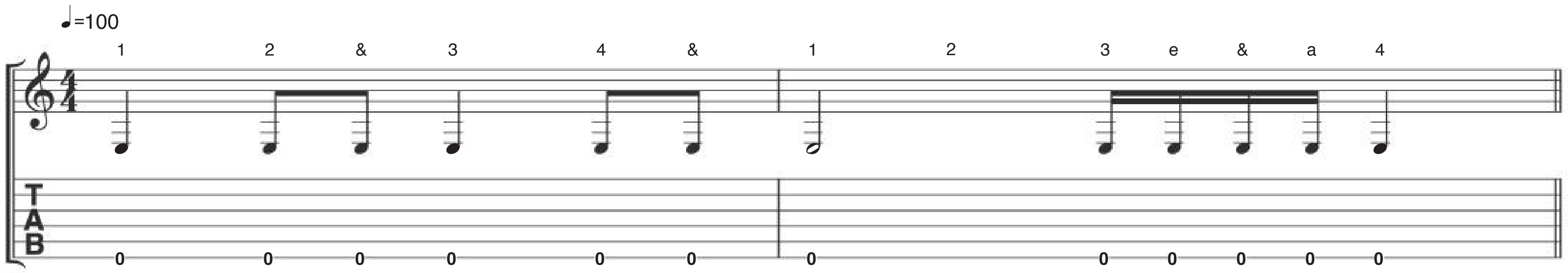
Guitarists are generally not so good at reading music. It's not entirely our fault, though. As you'll remember from the fretboard knowledge section every note can be played in lots of locations, so it's not as straightforward as it is on, say, a piano – where every note appears only once. What we definitely can be better at is understanding and reading rhythms. This will enable you to read chord charts like the one below and communicate better with other musicians – especially drummers. This section introduces you to basic rhythm notation and gives you a chance to test your knowledge.

RHYTHM TREE



This is the rhythm tree. It shows the most commonly used notes found in music notation and how each of the rhythms relate to one another. We've also included how each of the rhythms is counted in a bar of 4/4 time music.

COUNTING RHYTHMS

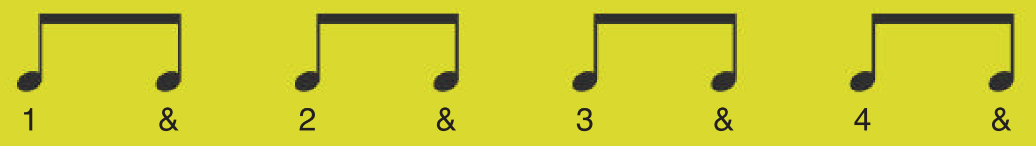


This example combines several rhythms but stays on one note, so you can focus your attention on following the rhythm as it's written. We recommend having a go at following the notation without any audio first, to see if you've understood the rhythm tree. Counting aloud as you play will help you stay in time.

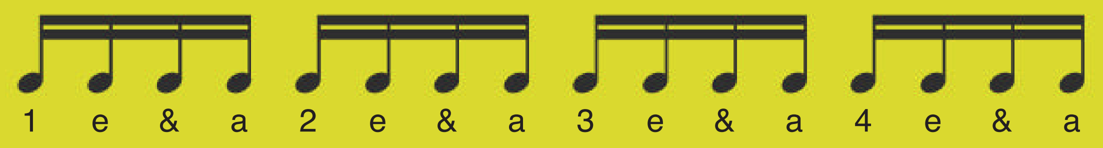
RHYTHM METHOD

APPLY MUSIC READING SKILLS TO YOUR PLAYING

Reading music isn't the easiest aspect of guitar playing. In fact, for some people, the symbols used in music might as well be some alien code. Still, the beams/stems of the notes do at least give you a good idea of *how many* times you need to strike a note or chord. And that gives you a clue as to which picking/strumming approach to use.

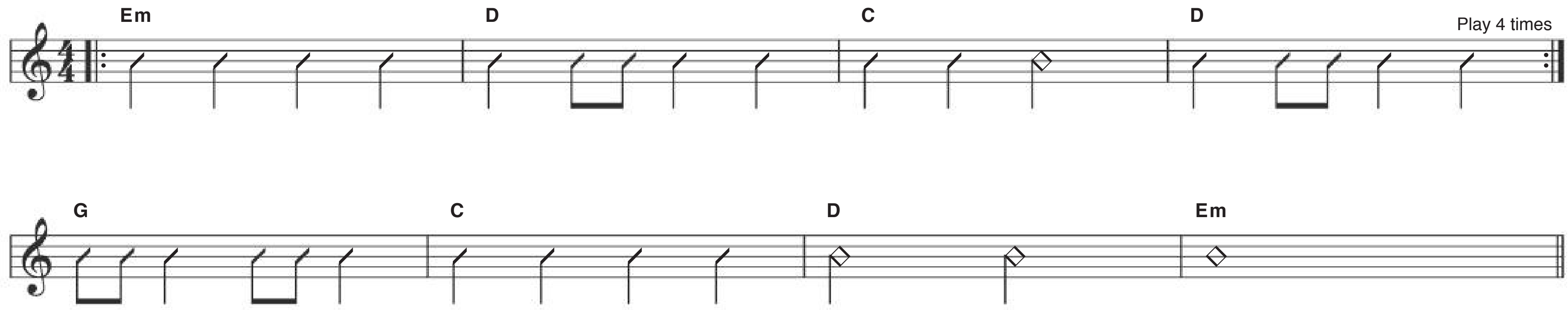


1. EIGHTH NOTES
Play these with constant downstrokes for a driving, urgent sound, or use alternating down- and upstrokes for a looser strummy sound.



2. 16TH NOTES
With four notes for every beat, you'll nearly always have to pick/strum 16th notes with alternating down-and upstrokes. They're just too quick to downpick.

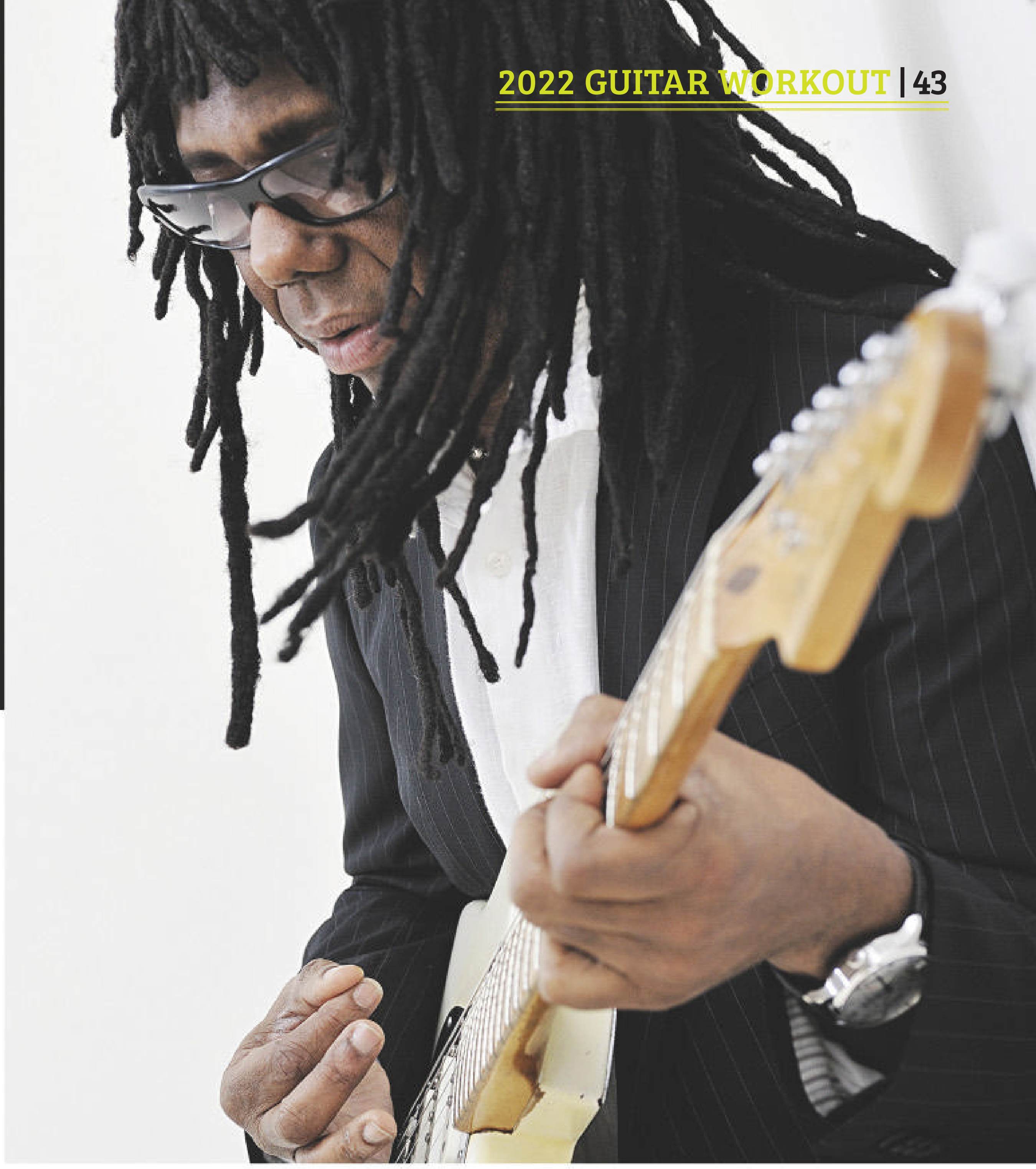
CHORD CHART WITH RHYTHMS



This chord chart is an excellent way to try out your newly-acquired knowledge. Play through it a few times and count the rhythms, then try it with our backing track. It's okay to have several attempts – sight reading will come later.

FUNK WORKOUT

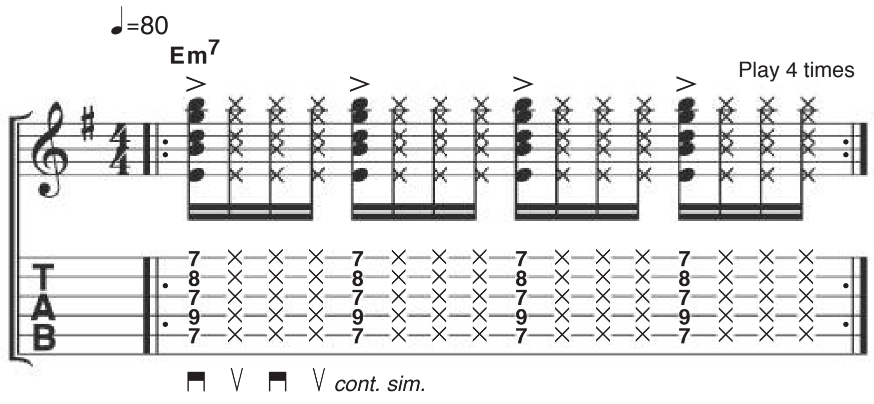
GET YOUR RHYTHM SKILLS UP TO SPEED AS WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE COOL, FUNKY SOUNDS OF 16TH NOTES.



No guitar workout would be complete without at least some attention paid to your strumming technique, and we're looking at a staple rhythm in funk and disco, the 16th-note. Let us oblige you with an explanation... 16th notes are so called because that's how many of 'em are in a bar of music in 4/4 time – 16!

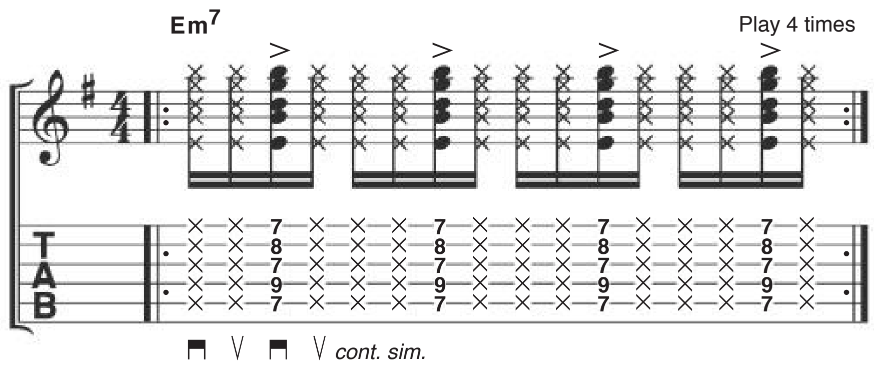
Listen to the intro riff in Deep Purple's 'Smoke On The Water'. The guitar part uses quarter notes but the hi-hat is playing 16ths. You can probably tell from this classic rocker then that 16th notes are usually fairly quick, and if you're going to recreate the rhythm with your strumming arm you need a steady, well-timed strumming technique. Our examples will help you develop your skills.

ON-BEAT CHORDS



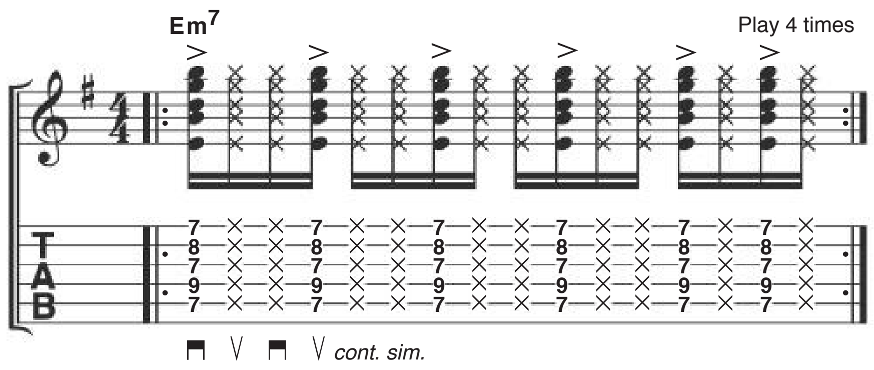
This line will help you establish a basic down-up strumming pattern. Emphasise the on-beat chords (the first of each group of four strums) then release pressure so that the strings are muted in between.

OFFBEAT CHORDS



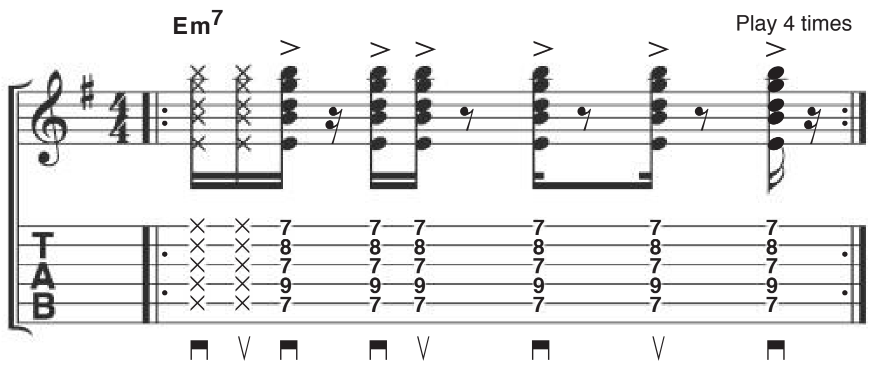
Here the same pattern is 'moved' so the offbeats are accented. You may find this one trickier to play even though it is essentially the same thing. Have a good listen to our version so you can hear how it sounds.

SIMPLE FUNK RHYTHM



Here we mix up the rhythms and a much funkier-sounding part is the result. Remember, the down-up strumming pattern stays the same – it's just the fretting hand pushing down on the strings that creates the rhythm.

CREATING SPACE



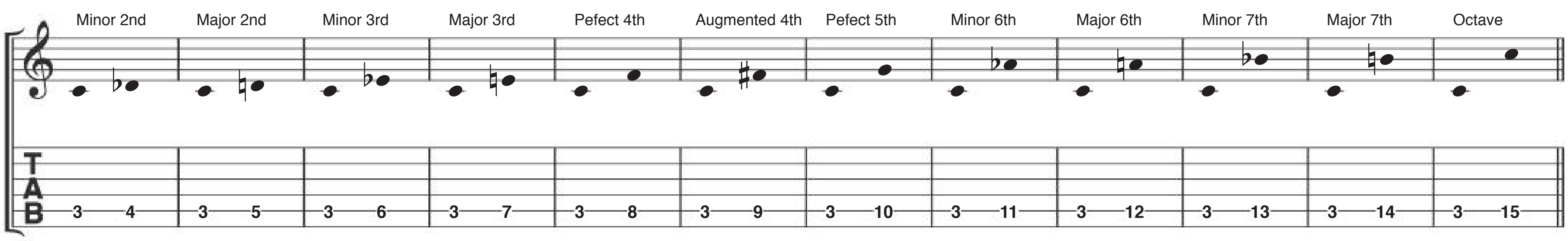
Finally, we look at how leaving space can break up the monotony of constant muted strokes. Keep moving your picking hand up and down to ensure good timing – just don't make contact with the strings in the gaps.

WORK OUT YOUR EARS

IDENTIFY INTERVALS BY EAR TO BECOME A BETTER IMPROVISER AND SONGWRITER.

The ears are one of a guitarist's biggest assets. They allow you to easily identify exactly what's going on in your favourite tracks, the ideas in your head, and what your bandmates are playing when they improvise and write songs. Identifying music's raw materials of intervals (the distance between two notes) and chords in isolation is a good place to start. As you become more familiar with each interval and chord's distinctive sound you'll start notice them every time you hear music.

INTERVALS AND A TABLE OF SONGS



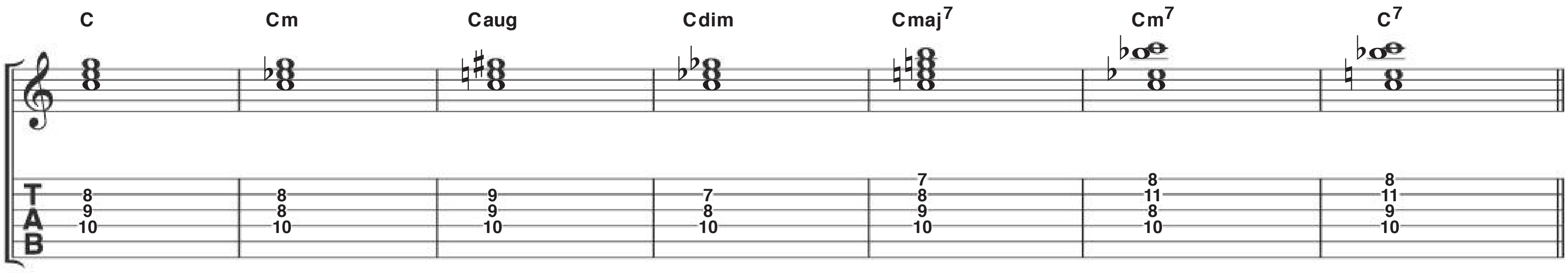
Here you can see how to play each interval (shown in the tab in the key of C) and we've given you a list of familiar tunes to help you recognise them. Listen to the sound qualities of each interval as you play them and if this all looks a bit scary, just work on the major and perfect intervals first.

Minor 2nd - *Jaws* Theme
Major 2nd - *Happy Birthday*
Minor 3rd - *Smoke On The Water*
Major 3rd - *Oh, When The Saints...*
Perfect 4th - *Here Comes The Bride*

Diminished 5th - *The Simpsons* Theme (root, 3rd, b5th)
Perfect 5th - *Star Wars* Theme
Minor 6th - *The Entertainer*
Major 6th - *My Way*

Minor 7th - *Somewhere* (*Westside Story*)
Major 7th - *Take On Me*
Octave - *Sweet Child O' Mine*

CHORDS A TABLE OF SOUND QUALITIES



We've also put together a handy table for chords. Be sure to play through the shapes shown here in the tab and see if you agree with our descriptions of their sounds. If not, create your own - what matters is that you can identify them and use them to create the sound you want!

Major - Happy
Minor - Sad
Augmented - Mysterious

Diminished - Dark
Major 7th - Reflective
Minor 7th - Dark, melancholy

Dominant 7th - Strong, but uneasy

PRACTISE PLANS

YOU'VE TRIED OUR EXERCISES, NOW IT'S DOWN TO YOU TO GET PRACTISING!

The key to improving at all these different guitar playing skills is regular practice. Each area will improve with a small amount of regular practice. How much emphasis you put in each section depends on your goals as a player and your existing strengths and weaknesses. We've prepared three example scenarios based on different players' goals. Feel free to follow the one that suits you or – better yet – create your own plan.

PLAYER 1
THE ALL-ROUND IMPROVER

For the guitarist who plays a bit of everything, including various styles of music and the odd solo or two...

5 minutes: Notes on the fingerboard
Find all the F notes, then all the G notes, and so on.

5 minutes: Warm-up
Play two of the easiest tab examples in the feature slowly.

10 minutes: Dexterity and agility
Choose two exercises, and aim to play them cleanly.

5 minutes: Write an octave lick
Try a different root note every time you attempt this.

5 minutes: Playing through changes
Follow the lesson daily until the 'landing notes' become second nature.

5 minutes: Ear training with intervals and chords
Try one of our tests.

5 minutes: Rhythm reading
Play any chord, making sure to follow the rhythm tree for your timing cues.

10 minutes: Funk
Get into a groove and loop one exercise per day.

10 minutes: Jam tracks
Alternate daily either playing lead or chords over our jam tracks.

PLAYER 2
THE TECHNICIAN

For players who are generally more interested in soloing and improving their dexterity, timing and technique...

5 minutes: Notes on the fingerboard
Find all the F notes, then all the G notes, and so on.

5 minutes: Warm-up
Play two of the easiest tab examples in the feature slowly.

5 minutes: Switch between four octave shapes
Choose four octave shapes and make quick, accurate changes between them.

15 minutes: Dexterity and accuracy
Try ten minutes on legato and spider exercises; five minutes on anything else.

5 minutes: Playing through changes
Land on a root note or chord tone on every change.

5 minutes: Ear training with intervals and chords
Try one of our tests.

5 minutes: Rhythm reading
Play through the rhythm tree using only the quarter-, eighth- and 16th notes.

10 minutes: Funk
Choose an exercise and play the rhythm with a) chords, then b) single notes.

10 minutes: Jam tracks
Apply the 'Playing through changes' concepts, using root notes and chord tones.

PLAYER 3
THE THEORY BUFF

For players who are looking to *understand* the music they play just as much as improve their technical skills...

5 minutes: Notes on the fingerboard
Find all the sharp and flat notes on the fretboard, e.g., G#, Bb, and so on.

5 minutes: Warm-up
Follow the major scale in 3rds and the string skipping exercises.

10 minutes: Ear training with intervals and chords
Try one of our tests. Identify the first interval in the melody of any song you like.

10 minutes: Playing through changes
Create your own progressions and licks, making sure to target root notes and chord tones.

10 minutes: Rhythm reading
Revisit this lesson daily to digest the information, then move onto the funk workout.

10 minutes: Funk
Try accenting different notes in each four-note grouping. It's a tough rhythm workout!

10 minutes: Jam track
Jam over one of our tracks first with chords, then arpeggios, repeating riffs and finally scalic licks.

WAIT, THAT'S AN EPIPHONE!?

IF ALL YOU KNOW ABOUT GIBSON AND EPIPHONE IS THAT ONE'S MADE IN THE USA WHILE THE OTHER'S MADE IN ASIA, WE'VE GOT A GUIDE THAT'LL BRING YOU RIGHT UP TO SPEED – AND HELP YOU FIND THE RIGHT ONE FOR YOU...

WORDS BY **ED MITCHELL** AND **DARYL ROBERTSON**.

Once upon a time, you bought an Epiphone guitar simply because you couldn't afford a Gibson. That's fact. As of 2022 however, a revamp of the Epiphone lineup means that these affordable heroes can no longer be dismissed as the poor cousins of "the real thing" and the Gibson vs Epiphone debate got a little more interesting. Vintage spec, pimped pickups and eyeball-seducing aesthetics mean that even the most modest budget can bag a guitar with serious tone, feel, and curb appeal.

It's all good news over at parent company Gibson USA too. After bouncing back following a period of uncertainty and poor management, the brand is putting out some of its best ever instruments. The message? No matter how much you have to splash out, there's a Gibson or Epiphone with your name on it. Let's help you find out which one that is...

THE HISTORY

These days we regard Epiphone electric guitars as the entry point into the Gibson catalogue. What you might not know is that Epiphone and Gibson were once arch-rivals. Actually, make that 'archtop' rivals. In the '30s, '40s and '50s, both brands produced big hollowbody archtop guitars for the numerous jazz players of the era. That rivalry came to an end in 1957 when Gibson purchased Epiphone.

In the late '50s, and throughout the '60s, Gibson produced a series of Epiphone-branded electrics that are now considered some of the greatest guitars of all time. Model names like Casino, Riviera, Coronet, Wilshire and Crestwood are enough to make vintage geeks drool at the mouth. These guitars possess tonal characteristics and playability that's driven up their resale value in the past couple of decades.

Sadly, Gibson betrayed that legacy by switching production of Epiphone to Japan in the 1970s. Don't be fooled. While a '70s Epiphone can technically be described as "vintage", spouting forth terms like "classic" is a step too far. Bolt-on necks. Poor quality wiring. Cheap hardware. There wasn't much going on there to be proud of. Of course, it's worth noting that Gibson didn't produce its best work throughout that decade either.

Over the past 40 years, Gibson and Epiphone have hit their fair share of peaks and troughs in terms of quality. The good news is we're currently experiencing a peak.

THE PLAYERS

You want brand ambassadors? The Gibson Les Paul Standard has been clutched by Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, top hat model Slash, Peter Green of Fleetwood Mac, Bluesbreakers-era Eric Clapton, Dire Straits' legend Mark Knopfler, hirsute hombre Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top, and thousands more.

The SG is synonymous with rock pioneer Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Mod god Paul Weller, Robbie Krieger of The Doors and Angus Young of AC/DC, natch. The Firebird is blues icon Johnny Winter, dead Rolling Stone Brian Jones and Joe Bonamassa. The ES semi-solid thinline guitars are Cream era Clapton, Alvin Lee of Ten Years After and BB King and his infamous squeeze "Lucille".

And Epiphone? The Beatles played Casinos in the mid-'60s. As a result, a '60s original costs a bloody fortune. We call that the "Beatle Tax". What really put the brand back in business in more 'recent' times was the conspicuous use of Epiphone by Noel Gallagher and Paul "Bonehead" Arthurs in the early days of Oasis.

THE TONES

Between 1952 and 1962 Gibson launched the Les Paul Standard, Junior and Special, the ES-335, Flying V and Explorer; not to mention a new double-cut Les Paul design in the early '60s that was eventually rechristened the SG. As pretty as all of these guitars are, it's the tones they produced that make them special.

Gibson guitars, and their Epiphone equivalents, come with either single coil P90 pickups or double coil humbuckers. As a rule of thumb, P90s produce a fat tone with good note separation when you engage your overdrive or distortion. They make a great punk sound. Think Johnny Thunders of the New York Dolls and Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong. The downside to P90s is they can produce a lot of background hum.

Humbuckers, as the name suggests, produce way less background noise but that comes at the expense of clarity. Neck pickups in particular can sound a bit 'woolly'. That said, some of the greatest rock and blues tones of all time have been fuelled by 'buckers so it hasn't put cats like Jimmy Page and Slash off their game.

THE SPEC

The big difference between Epiphone and Gibson guitars is the finish. Gibson models are coated in a vintage style nitrocellulose lacquer. This can be satin or gloss. Epiphone guitars come shipped in a tougher poly finish. What's the difference? Nitro is usually applied in a thinner coat than poly. It also ages in a different way. Nitrocellulose reacts to stuff like the environment, oils from your skin, and light exposure. It looks cool. Many players also believe it allows the guitar to "breathe" for better tone.

Poly finishes are harder wearing. A ten-year-old poly Les Paul can look like new if it's looked after. These guitars usually come with chrome hardware which maintains its gleam over the years. The nickel hardware fitted to nitro-coated Gibson guitars will dull over time. Again, this looks agreeable when working in cahoots with a time-worn nitro lacquer.

You'll also encounter different fingerboard woods on Gibson and Epiphone guitars. The former will generally feature rosewood 'boards. Custom Shop reissue Les Paul Customs come spec'd with ebony 'boards. Other Customs have synthetic Richlite fingerboards, an eco substitute for ebony. Many Epiphone guitars now feature Indian Laurel 'boards, a sustainable alternative to rosewood that you'll find on many manufacturers' sub-$1,000 guitar spec sheets.

THE ADVICE

Don't judge a guitar by its price tag. Guitars are magical things. Even something cheap can produce a great tone. If you have less than a grand to invest, you might prefer a higher spec Epiphone for the price of an entry-level Gibson. Get your hands on a few examples of both and compare the sounds and playability. A great deal of the Gibson and Epiphone models you find will have the "60s SlimTaper" neck shape. This popular neck profile might not suit everyone. If you prefer something with a bit more meat then consider a '50s spec model or any guitar with a "rounded" profile neck.

Compare weight too. SGs tend to be light, around seven pounds. A Les Paul often sits between eight and nine pounds, especially if it's weight-relieved. Non weight relieved Custom Shop reissue Les Paul Customs can run between nine and eleven pounds, or more. We're not fat shaming here. If you're going to be hanging your guitar from a strap at a gig or rehearsal, all night, weight can be an important factor.

Finally, it's worth mentioning that the 24.75-inch scale length of a Gibson and Epiphone - the distance between the bridge and top nut - can allow you to fit heavier strings than you might think. A set of .010 or .011 gauge strings will feel lighter and easier to bend on a Gibson/Epiphone than a longer scale (25.5-inch) Fender. Don't be afraid to try something heavier than you're used to. You might find you prefer the tone of thicker strings, and tuning stability can be better too.

Still not sure whether to drop your budget on an Epiphone or save for a Gibson? We've picked out a handful of our favorite models available today to help you narrow down your search.

THE EPIPHONES

EPIPHONE ORIGINAL SG SPECIAL

Don't get fooled again. Make sure you try this guitar...

PROS
- Lightweight
- Good looks
- Very close to vintage spec

CONS
- P-90s are noisier than humbuckers

Don't confuse this guitar with the entry-level bolt-on neck Epiphone SG. The Original SG is a welcome recreation of one of the coolest electric guitars ever made, the P-90-loaded Gibson SG Special. In the 60s, Gibson offered humbucker-spec'd Standard and Custom SGs, plus a single P-90 model called the Junior, and a twin P-90 guitar called, you guessed it, the Special. The latter model has become a rock icon due to Pete Townshend of The Who.

The Original lives up to its name thanks to a lightweight mahogany body, slim mahogany neck, and a combined Lightning Bolt bridge/tailpiece. Lightning Bolt refers to the preset intonation stamped on the top of the bridge. Fat sounding P-90s complete the tonal feast.

EPIPHONE 1959 LES PAUL STANDARD

The closest you'll get to a vintage LP under two grand?

PROS
- Looks the business
- Excellent pickups

CONS
- The slim neck might not work for you

This classy looking LP is inspired by possibly the most coveted guitar of all time - the 1959 Gibson Les Paul Standard. Now, while an original "burst" would set you back several hundred thousand dollars, this top of the range Epiphone will get you close to that iconic look and sound at a fraction of the price.

As you'd expect, this guitar sticks to the beloved formula we all know and love. Of course, the body is predominantly mahogany with a pretty flame maple cap to add some eye candy, while the neck sports the comfortable '59 profile that many players believe is the best Gibson has ever produced.

Bringing the power is a set of genuine Gibson BurstBucker pickups, meaning this guitar is another step closer to sounding like the real deal. In other good news, you also get an Epiphone hardshell case to keep your new guitar safe when travelling from venue to venue.

EPIPHONE CASINO COUPE

Beatle tone for sale!

PROS

- Super light
- That hollowbody P-90 tone is to die for

CONS

- Casinos are way more prone to feedback than semi-acoustic and electric guitars

It was actually Beatle bassist Paul McCartney who bought the Fab Four's first Epiphone Casino in 1964. He used his '62 model to play the solos on 'Drive My Car' and 'Taxman'. John Lennon and George Harrison bought their Casinos new in 1965. Lennon would use his almost exclusively for the rest of his time with the band.

The modern Casino Coupe incorporates the features of the original guitars into a slightly scaled down body, the same dimensions as Gibson's ES-339 models. Like any classic Casino, the Coupe has a hollow body and a pair of P-90 single coil pickups. Good enough for The Beatles, Paul Weller, Gary Clark Jr... good enough for you.

EPIPHONE ORIGINAL FIREBIRD

The 'bird is the word...

PROS

- Cool vintage spec at an affordable price
- Mini humbuckers pack plenty of punch

CONS

- Firebirds can be a little neck-heavy on a strap

It's no secret Fender was kicking Gibson's ass in the late '50s. Leo Fender had the smart idea to offer his guitars in the same DuPont paint codes as the cars rolling out of the motor factories in Detroit. In the early '60s, Gibson went one better, hiring retired car designer Ray Dietrich to sketch a new guitar shape. His elegant Firebird was launched in 1963.

The new Original Firebird has all the mojo of Ray's original design. Most notable is the same sustain promoting thru-body design that attracted legends like bluesman Johnny Winter and Rolling Stone Brian Jones. Look closely and you'll see that the neck runs all the way to the bottom of the body. The classic shape is completed by a pair of mahogany wings, glued one on each side.

GIBSON SG STANDARD

For those about to buy...

PROS

- Classic tone
- Lightweight with a slim neck
- C'mon, just look at it!

CONS

- None, we're in love

The SG Standard is the biggest selling Gibson guitar of all time. That's not just because Angus Young loves 'em, although that doesn't hurt. The SG Standard is a tone machine. It's lightweight, sustains like a chatterbox on speed and plays host to a pair of sweet sounding humbuckers.

The best thing Gibson could've done with the latest SG Standard is not mess with the formula. Job done. That beautifully sculpted twin Devil horn body is pure '60s classic. Ditto the all mahogany body and neck construction and rosewood 'board. It's that combination that's made players from Angus to Weller very happy indeed.

THE EPIPHONES | **THE GIBSONS**

GIBSON SLASH LES PAUL STANDARD

Everything's Slash-ed, except the price...

PROS

- Great build and finishing
- Super playable
- Raunchy rock tones

CONS

- Not everyone will enjoy the fact that it's on the heavier side

The fact that Slash didn't use an actual Gibson Les Paul during the recording of Guns N' Roses' *Appetite For Destruction*, well, that's a wormhole you can wander down at your leisure. This new Slash LP is all Gibson and comes spec'd by the cat in the top hat himself.

Those of you who prefer something meaty in the palm of your hand should enjoy the girth of this guitar's '50s profile neck. This guitar is all about the chunk; the body isn't weight relieved. The November Burst lacquer has a satin look. The Appetite Burst is a gloss nitro finish that tributes the guitar Slash actually played back in the day. The Alnico-II pups produce classic rock tones just as you might expect. This guitar is more about good taste than extreme firepower.

GIBSON MODERN COLLECTION ES-335

Gibson's greatest 'hollow' victory...

PROS

- Classic tones
- Rounded C neck is a nice alternative to slim neck models

CONS

- Satin finish might not be everyone's cup of tea

The Gibson ES-335 is a work of genius. First launched in 1958, this beautiful guitar looks like a hollowbody with all the screeching feedback production that specification inspires. In fact, the 335 has a solid block run through the body to reduce unwanted shrieks. It's a simple but effective idea that many other manufacturers have copied.

There are a bunch of ES-335 models in the current Gibson catalogue, including the super tasty Chris Cornell Signature. This satin finish Modern Collection offers the looks, feel and sound of a classic ES-335 at a slightly more affordable price. Spec includes a maple/poplar/maple laminated body and a rounded C shape mahogany neck.

GIBSON LES PAUL JUNIOR

A punk-rock legend.

PROS

- Vintage vibe
- Great P90-fuelled tones

CONS

- Some players will need more than one pickup

At this point, this single-pickup, single-cutaway guitar is a punk rock legend, with many players such as Green Day frontman, Billie Joe Armstrong, relying on this straightforward guitar to achieve some of the greatest tones of all time. The Les Paul Junior may have started life as a stripped-back student model, but it has gone on to have quite the cult following, with many players falling in love with its aggressive mid focused bark.

The new Original Collection Gibson Les Paul Junior does a fantastic job at capturing everything we love about this late '50s axe. From the stellar Dog-Ear P90 to the rounded '50s neck, vintage wraparound bridge and glorious gloss nitrocellulose lacquer, this simple Gibson really has it all.

LIVE IT UP

NEED SOME HELP CREATING A SONIC STORM ONSTAGE? HERE ARE TEN EASY AND PRACTICAL TIPS FOR GETTING A GREAT LIVE GUITAR SOUND.

WORDS BY **CHRIS BIRD**.

As we near the middle of 2022, guitarists around the world will be making plans for a post-pandemic return to live performance. Many others will be preparing to play their first gigs after learning to play the instrument during the various lockdown periods.

If you fit into either of those categories, you've probably started thinking about how to get your guitar sound ready for the stage. This guide to getting a great live guitar sound is here to help you, offering soundchecking advice, pedalboard setup tips, ways to achieve clean, noise-free tones, and much more. So, plug in and let's rock!

KEEP ONSTAGE LEVELS MODERATE

Can't wait to crank your guitar amp up to 11? You may want to reconsider, particularly if the amp is mic'd up through a PA system. As well as keeping your sound guy sweet, dialling back those levels from ear-splitting to merely moderate will give you greater control over both the house mix and your onstage monitoring. If you hanker for a 'cranked amp' tone, consider using an amp with less power, paired to a smaller speaker cab with fewer drivers.

The last few years have seen the rise of portable combo amps and mini heads. These are often equipped with onboard power soaks designed to run in low power modes, enabling you to dial in sweet saturation at lower levels. We really rate Peavey's Invective MH Mini Amp Head as a great amp for metal, and the long-established Tubemeister series from Hughes & Kettner still packs a punch as a practical rock amp.

EMPTY ROOM VS. FULL ROOM

You have one primary goal during soundcheck: to set up your gear so that you can hear yourself and your bandmates clearly. Our advice? Get to the venue early, get friendly with the sound engineer and spend some time checking that your levels are consistent when you change amp channels or engage an effect.

Most important is to be aware that an empty room during soundcheck 'sounds' different to the same venue when it's full of headbanging rockers! Your adoring audience will be dampening the echoes that you carefully compensated for during soundcheck, which is why guitarists often turn their amps up further once a gig gets under way. Be aware of the dreaded 'volume creep' and ensure that you turn up to gig levels during soundcheck.

TACKLING FEEDBACK

When it comes to feedback, any guitarist using an amp onstage has two primary concerns: volume level and the guitar's location in relation to the speaker. We've already waxed lyrical about onstage levels, so let's talk location. For the 'infinite sustain' effect in Parisienne Walkways, late blues-rock great Gary Moore would locate the precise spot onstage where his Gibson Les Paul and cranked Marshall amps would feed back the most, and mark it with tape on the floor. All during soundcheck, of course.

To prevent unintended feedback, you need to do the opposite. Dial in the loudest sound you'll play, then identify the spots where you encounter feedback. If it's a constant problem and you have to keep your amp cranked, consider adding an EQ pedal to your 'board. A narrow 'notch filter' cut matched to the feedback frequency can improve matters drastically.

GET YOUR PEDALS IN ORDER

If you're looking for creative inspiration, it'll pay to experiment with the order of your guitar pedals. However, there are a few signal chain golden rules that'll help you to get great tones without trial and error. Here's the conventional wisdom...

Wah pedals come first, before preamps and distortion/overdrive pedals. Plug these into your amp's input. If your amp has an effects loop, add delays, modulations and reverb pedals in that order here. These latter effects create copies of a signal, which is why they usually sound better after any gain or distortion. If you reverse them, expect a muddy tone that lacks clarity.

Compressors are best placed either first in your chain (great for taming spiky funk chops) or last (more akin to studio compression; great for smooth lead tones). Like we say, these are general conventions, so feel free to write your own rulebook!

CLEAN BOOST: THE UNSUNG LIVE HERO

A secret weapon on any gigging guitarist's pedalboard, a clean boost will increase your signal level – usually by around 15 to 20 decibels – but without the extreme colouration of a distortion pedal. If you love your valve amp's tone and don't want to fundamentally change it, go for a boost.

Use one as a temporary boost for soaring solos, or as an 'always-on' brightness/EQ bump. Placed in front of your amp's input, it'll drive your preamp harder into its natural overdrive; put it at the end of your effects loop and you'll get a cleaner boost, preserving more of your tone.

BANISH SIGNAL CHAIN NOISE

If your rig generates hum or buzz at home, you can bet your house that it'll be orders of magnitude worse when you play live. Single-coil pickups are perennial offenders, and, though noiseless pickups are worth considering, you chose your guitar because you liked the sound, right? Noise gates provide the solution. Many multi-effects pedals include a global gate (set it and forget it; it'll work on every preset) – or you could opt for a dedicated stompbox.

Shielded instrument leads help to prevent radio frequency noise creeping in via your cables, and we recommend investing in an isolated multi-output power supply to solve any mains-related noise issues on your pedalboard. There's also the issue of proximity. Certain pedals (distortion and wah are the worst) can pick up noise from certain external power supplies when placed nearby. Though a compact pedalboard offers convenience, consider creating space on your 'board if you encounter noise.

"THERE ARE NO ABSOLUTE RULES GOVERNING HOW YOU SHOULD EQ YOUR GUITAR SOUND, AND YOUR APPROACH WILL DIFFER DEPENDING ON THE STYLE OF MUSIC YOU PLAY..."

BASIC DIGITAL MODELLING SETUP

The first stage of setting up a digital amp or effects modeller is also the most in-depth – you'll need to take time and care to dial in all the sounds you require for your gigs. Stage two takes place at the rehearsal room, where you should level-check each preset to ensure that it cuts through the band mix.

Before you go near a stage, you'll need to choose between dialling into the PA (and using house monitoring) or providing your own powered speaker cabinet. House monitoring offers convenience but your sound will be different at every gig. If you supply your own cab, you'll need the full-range, flat-response (FRFR) kind in order to give an uncoloured representation of your modeller's sound.

Line 6, Kemper and Headrush offer FRFR cabs to accompany their digital gear, and many other brands, such as Blackstar, Harley Benton, Friedman and Laney, offer further options to mix and match with. Regardless, beware the FRFR moniker! Despite the 'flat response' description, every amplified cab has its own sonic character and should be carefully auditioned with your gear.

STEREO GUITAR AMPS

This is an involved and contentious subject because stereo guitar rigs can be tricky to set up. Get it right and your lush panning delays and modulations will soar; get it wrong and it'll be a recipe for disaster, with phase cancellation and directional issues thinning out your sound.

If you use a stereo guitar combo, be sure to tell the sound engineer – they'll need to mic up both speakers. Arguably the simplest way to do stereo is with a digital modeller, running dual outputs from your device into a stereo PA for the audience to enjoy, while you make do with basic mono monitoring onstage if complications arise.

If you bring two speaker cabs onstage, keep in mind that this approach requires more 'tuning' to compensate for the acoustics of each room and allow extra time to find the prime position for your cabs. Finally, note that dual-amping will be a likely culprit in the event of ground loop hum.

SOUNDCHECKING YOURSELF?

No live sound engineer? Then it's time to plug in your longest cable and head out to the front of the stage to set your band's levels. Thankfully, there's a method that'll see you right: set your lead vocal levels first, then your kick drum and bass instruments, before building mid-range instruments such as keyboards, backing vocals and your own guitar sound around the core. Our reasoning? Your lead singer will be the focal point, so their level is the most important and everything else should be adjusted around them.

Kick and bass (even floor toms) are low-end instruments with the most energy and the most potential to overload your PA speakers, so they'll also dictate your final level. Mid-range instruments come next, with EQ tweaks being performed once you have a basic mix. Keep the lead vocals, kick drum and bass centre-panned, with mid-range instruments mixed a little left or right to match their position onstage.

GENERAL EQ TIPS

There are no absolute rules governing how you should EQ your guitar sound, and your approach will differ depending on the style of music you play. However, there are some basics to consider. First, bass... In a live band mix, let the kick drum and bass guitar occupy most of the low end. Gently roll the guitar off at around 80-100Hz to give them room. For weighty, palm-muted guitar parts, a boost between 100 and 150Hz will be just the ticket. For a generally rounder, fatter sound, boost at around 300Hz – but be prepared to move up or down quite a bit to suit.

Gentle midrange tweaks to suit each room's response are par for the course. However, if your tone lacks top-end bite, do be wary of your amp's treble control. Amp controls are generally fairly wide-band; a small treble boost could radically alter your carefully crafted tones altogether. A dedicated multi-band EQ pedal is our preferred option for performing most of these tweaks, particularly the top-end adjustments.

KNUCKLE UP

BARE KNUCKLE PICKUPS FOUNDER TIM MILLS DETAILS THE TONAL QUALITIES THAT HAVE PLAYERS TURNING TO THE CLASSIC SINGLE-COIL P-90 DESIGN ONCE AGAIN.

WORDS BY **ROD BRAKES**.
PHOTO BY **JOSEPH BRANSTON**.

Originally produced by Gibson from 1946, P-90s were one of the first mass-produced single-coil electric guitar pickups and have remained in regular production to this day. Having been somewhat eclipsed by the PAF humbucker from the late '50s onwards, they have in recent years experienced a resurgence in popularity. We're curious to hear why, so we catch up with Tim Mills at Bare Knuckle to get his take on the revival of the P-90.

"P-90s are characterised by a very wide, squat coil," begins Tim. "They are traditionally wound with 42 [AWG] gauge plain enamel wire to around 10,000 turns. That's the classic spec for an authentic vintage-style P-90. The early ones are typically Alnico III or, more commonly, Alnico II. The coils were nearly always unpotted and were propped up on wooden spacers – used to heighten or lower the coil – in a nickel tray.

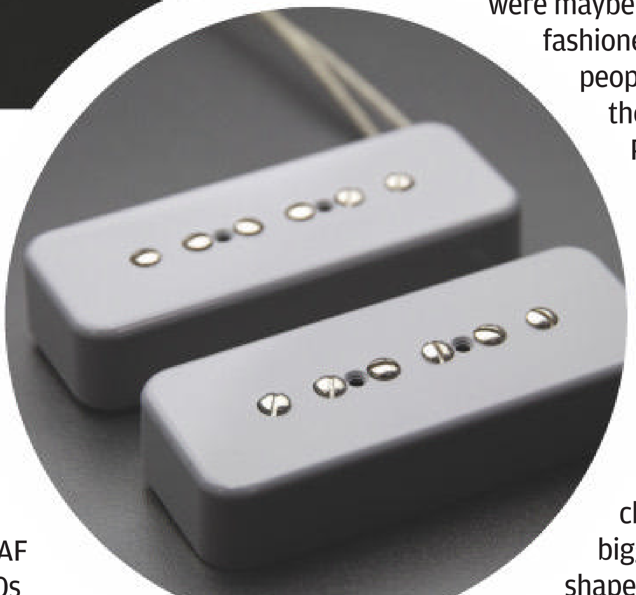
"The early P-90s were characterised by a very shallow butyrate cover that just about covered the top to protect it. As you get to the late '50s/early '60s you find Alnico V magnets starting to be used more commonly, which was the biggest tonal shift up to that point. Moving further into the '60s, you see poly wire and clear plastic bobbins starting to be used, which can be fragile and prone to fracture. And as you get into the '70s, Gibson moves back to the more traditional black coil former."

Prized for their dynamic sound, P-90s have found favour across a huge range of musical styles, as Tim explains. "P-90s have quite a chunky, muscular wind on the coil," he says, "and they have two bar magnets driving them, so they're capable of producing quite a bit of output. There's this lovely wide frequency response, which is typical of a single coil. With a P-90 you've got depth – extension in the bass, and lots of clear highs, but there's this lovely drive in the midrange as well.

"There's no hollowness. It's a very strident sound. P-90s are extremely dynamic. They're very responsive to the volume and tone pots: you can make them as dirty as you want, and you can clean them up as much as you want. They're incredibly versatile."

In 1957, Gibson began introducing the PAF humbucker to its electric guitars and the new design soon began to overshadow the older P-90. "P-90s are single coil, so there's no hum cancelling going on, which was a real problem back in the day," highlights Tim. "50/60 cycle hum was the enemy. As amplifiers got louder and more gain-y, mains and RF interference became more of an issue. But back then, electrics were nothing like as good as they are today. I use lots of single-coil pickups and I never have a problem with noise. Whether I'm recording at my computer, in a studio or at a gig.

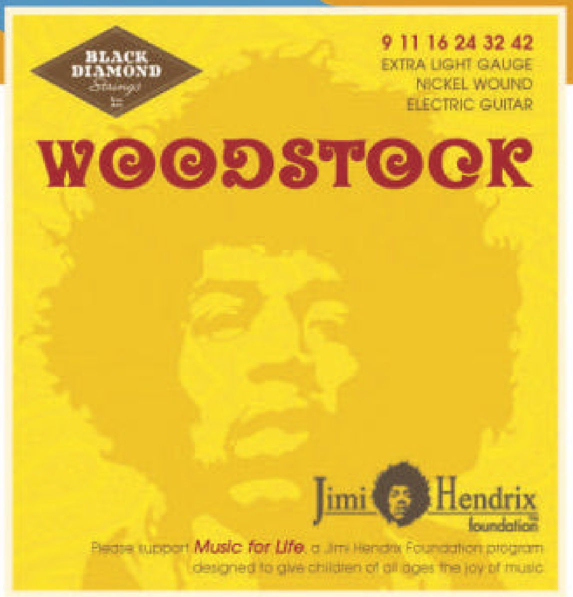
"After the PAF came along, cutting-edge guitar music became louder and heavier. People often associated the sound – and sight! – of Gibson humbuckers with those players. So P-90s were maybe viewed as a bit old-fashioned by some. But now people have gone back and they are rediscovering the P-90s. Over the past ten to 15 years, there has been a huge resurgence in their popularity across the board.



"Early on at Bare Knuckle I was focusing on trying to make a P-90 that I could mount on a humbucker chassis because the biggest problem is the shape of them. So with the humbucker-sized P-90s we make you can get all of the P-90 tone in a humbucker shape. As long as you've got that wide, squat coil you can get that P-90 sound. Now, if you've got humbuckers and you want to get into P-90s, there's nothing stopping you. At all. Every regular-sized P-90 model I make I do in humbucker size as well. We do seven-string versions, too.

"There's nothing quite like a P-90," Mills says in closing. "They sit so well between Fender-style single coils and a humbucking tone, but they also have their own vibe. To a certain extent they are the king of pickups."

Black Diamond Strings is pleased to announce their new line of Jimi Hendrix Foundation guitar strings.



Like the unique sound of Jimi Hendrix, Black Diamond's precision wound, carefully tensioned strings set them apart from all the rest. The secret is in the core which is drawn carefully into the high carbon hexagonal shaped wire then wound with nickel-plated steel for electric and phosphor bronze and silver-plated for acoustic.

These strings lend themselves to the aggressive playing style and inventive rhythm work by the revolutionary guitarist.

Since 1987 JVB PREMIUM STRINGS

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TONE TUTORS

IN THE DEBATE OVER WHETHER ONLINE GUITAR LESSONS COULD EVER TRULY TRUMP FACE-TO-FACE TUTORING, ONLY ONE QUESTION MATTERS: WHICH IS RIGHT FOR *YOU?* FROM COST AND CONVENIENCE TO COMMUNITY AND PROGRESS TRACKING, WE WEIGH UP THE PROS AND CONS OF BOTH APPROACHES TO LEARNING THE GUITAR.

WORDS BY **CHRIS BIRD**.

Us learner guitarists have never had it as good as we do now. There are enough video lessons on YouTube to last anyone for, well, probably forever. Reputable online guitar lessons sites are plentiful in number. There's a whole world of tutorial content that you can access using just your smartphone. And, though learning guitar has been a little trickier lately for those who prefer their tuition face to face with a human, technology has been a saving grace, with video conferencing platforms helping keep students and teachers in touch.

Now, as pandemic restrictions begin to ease in many territories, getting together with a guitar teacher is something you might once again consider. But will you be spending your cash with a 'real' tutor? Or is the convenience of virtual lessons more of a draw to you? Both approaches have pros and cons after all. Read on and we'll look at some of these benefits and drawbacks. There's no right or wrong here, but hopefully we'll help you decide how to move forward with your own learning.

COST

It's a simple fact: in-person guitar lessons cost more than online tuition. You'll pay between $80 and $230 for a year's subscription to a service like Yousician, Gibson's 'Your Guitar Teacher' app, Fender Play, Pickup Music, TrueFire, Guitar Tricks or JamPlay. And if that's still too expensive, every site offers either a 'lite' free option or a full-featured

trial period, so you can choose a platform before parting with your cash.

According to Lessons.com, on average a single hourlong lesson will cost somewhere between $40 and $60 – and you can pay a lot more than that for in-demand teachers. Of course, pro tutors can't possibly compete with online subscription rates, but complimentary taster sessions, discounts for block booking and cost-sharing group lessons help keep in-person tuition affordable.

BENEFITS FOR BEGINNERS

If you're just starting out on guitar, most online tuition sites have plenty of content for you. Notably, both Gibson and Yousician's mobile apps offer an interactive experience, using your tablet/phone's microphone to tell you in real time if you're playing correctly. The Fender Play website features a clear, contemporary design, with a great course that'll get beginners plucking, strumming and fretting with minimal fuss. Their site also includes a new 'feedback mode', currently in beta, that's similar to Gibson/Yousician's real-time interactivity.

The tech is exciting, but it's something a human does better. The constant feedback from a qualified tutor helps beginners identify mistakes and correct them on the spot. No tutor? You risk ingraining 'bad' techniques that can hold you back, potentially for years. We'd recommend every beginner takes a few one-to-one lessons at the very least.

CONVENIENCE

Online tuition scores high for convenience. Of course it does – it's the internet. You can access lesson content at any time, day or night, and hit rewind/play as many times as you need. Still, private tutors are keen for your business and you can expect them to try to be as flexible as humanly possible. Many offer home visits and, since the start of the global pandemic in 2020, lessons via Zoom have become increasingly popular (and higher tech). If you're studying for guitar grades with a tutor, it's worth noting that some providers have begun to offer their exams digitally too. You really can achieve a lot from the comfort of your living room, whichever approach to learning you prefer.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Some private guitar tutors, particularly those with long rosters of students and larger teaching spaces, organize regular group concerts and social events. You can develop live performance skills, learn more about your gear and build your confidence and stagecraft, all while making new friends and having fun. Ask in your local guitar shop – they'll probably know someone.

Not to be outdone, most tuition websites have some kind of community offering too. Guitar Tricks has a substantial online forum where students can chat about their progress, and TrueFire has a public Facebook group for students. Online or offline, there's plenty to choose from.

QUALITY OF TEACHING MATERIALS

Online tuition sites offer more facilities than ever before. For instance, TrueFire's video lessons are time-stretchable and include guitar tab that tracks along with the video at your chosen playback speed. You can loop sections, select fullscreen or side-by-side view and download content to desktop or mobile platforms.

As regards in-person lessons, most tutors have their own teaching materials and technology, including tab/notation software such as Guitar Pro or Finale. Many will be happy for you to record your lessons to refer back to, either live in the room or via Zoom. And no online platform can create a bespoke lesson on the spot based on a question you ask them. You definitely need a teacher for that!

PERSONALITIES

YouTube's content creators range from beginners who'll show you what they've just learned, right up to pro-level player/videographers offering virtuoso tuition. For general tuition, we recommend following well-known popular tutors such as Justin Sandercoe, Andy Crowley or Marty Schwartz, who offer a wealth of free material, as well as some paid for content. If you're considering face to face tuition, it's important that you get on well with your teacher. Many tutors rely on word of mouth for their business, so a recommendation from a guitar-playing friend is well worth following up on.

PROGRESS TRACKING

If you opt for freebie YouTube content, you'll be the sole judge of your progress, but you'll see best results if you follow structured lesson content and receive regular feedback. Some sites allow you to 'mark as complete' each lesson as you go, which is useful but rudimentary.

Make sure to use the more interactive facilities on offer, such as Gibson, Yousician and Fender Play's real-time jamming features and JamPlay's live Q&A tutor sessions. Perhaps inevitably, in-person tuition is a clear winner for tracking your progress. A good teacher will ensure you end every lesson with a practice plan to see you through till your next session.

THE MASTERCLASS MODEL

If you want to learn from famous guitarists, TrueFire has a huge selection of courses presented by big name players. Pickup Music is much smaller, with only a few star tutors, but it's a cool site with a youthful vibe and it's growing. However, global pandemics notwithstanding, masterclasses are not restricted to the internet.

If you prefer your masterclasses in person, there are a raft of companies that cater for you. In the US, Guitar Workshop Plus organises week-long workshops, complete with visiting world-famous guitarists. In the UK, Guitar Breaks offers bespoke courses with pro tutors and star guitarists alike, and IGF hosts an annual guitar summer school featuring some of the country's best known guitar teachers. There's certainly a cost consideration here, but there's something for everyone if you've got the coin.

HOW MUCH WILL YOUR PLAYING IMPROVE?

This is the $64,000 question and answering it depends on what you want to achieve with your playing. In-person lessons with a qualified tutor are bespoke to your needs, so your progress can be fast-tracked and you'll nip technical errors in the bud quickly. If you're having weekly lessons, it's worth committing to a few months' worth to really get the best results.

Conversely, sites like Fender Play help beginners cover the basics, but without the forensic feedback of a private tutor, so your progress may vary. TrueFire offers zillions of short- and medium-length lessons and courses and there's a bit of a 'pick and choose' vibe, as if the site were your own vast private library. Ultimately, you get out what you put in, whatever kind of lessons you choose, but there's no substitute for being in the room with someone who can direct you in person. With a good tutor you'll always be on the right track.

ON AN ISLAND IN THE SUN

I DIDN'T TOUCH AN ACOUSTIC GUITAR DURING THE PANDEMIC. COULD A PRIVATE ISLAND RETREAT WITH ONE OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST GUITAR TUTORS HELP ME RECONNECT?

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY **MICHAEL ASTLEY-BROWN**.

Guitarists coped with the enforced isolation of the pandemic in different ways. Some finessed their technique, others checked off songs on their must-learn list. For me, productivity was my distraction: I was playing electric guitar, always plugged in, always writing, always recording. In my mind, it wouldn't feel like a waste of a year if I had something to show for it.

The downside to this musical hot streak was a complete disconnect from the simple joy of actually playing. My Cort acoustic gathered dust on its stand in the corner of the living room, while my electrics got an eternal workout. Playing live shows with function bands had previously been my impetus for learning new material – without that catalyst, I was lost in an eternal loop of capturing perfect takes and perfect tones.

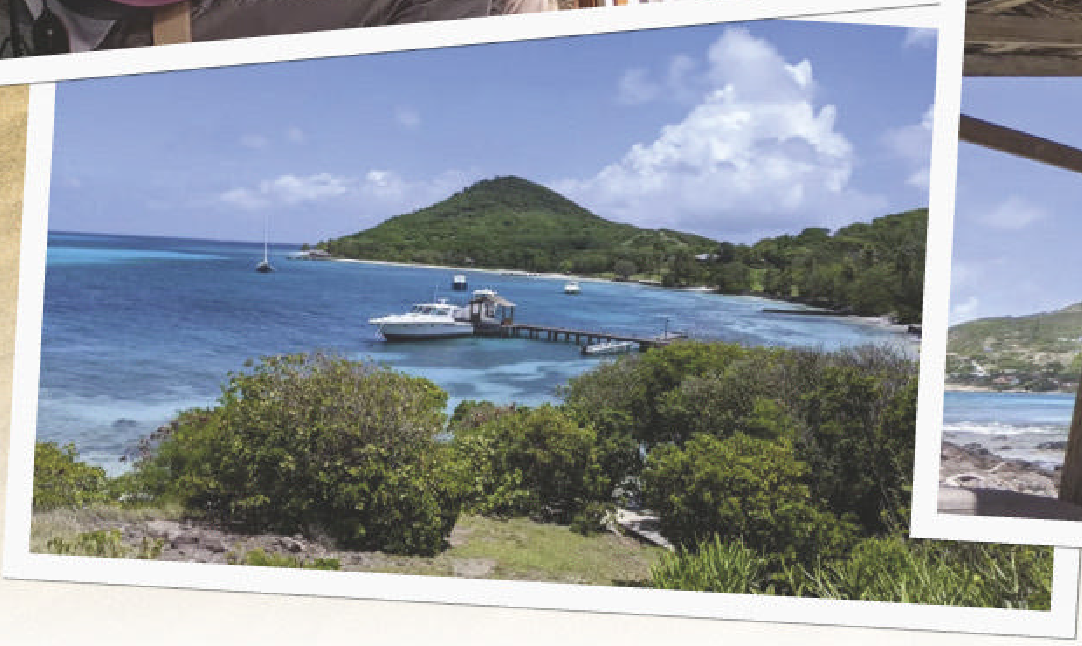
Looking back, I felt a mental – and, dare I say, spiritual – need to reconnect with the guitar as a source of enjoyment, and I was fortunate that the right trip came along at the right time: an acoustic guitar retreat with online guitar tutor royalty Justin Sandercoe (aka JustinGuitar) on the private Caribbean island of St. Vincent. Yep, that'll do nicely.

While the trip was originally scheduled to take place way back in April 2020, COVID-19 forced its rescheduling to July 2021. As it turned out, this would prove fortuitous, providing an opportunity to break away from the monotony of pandemic life, not to mention my recording rig.

~~APRIL~~ *JULY* SUN IN CUBA

Two planes and one boat later, myself and a handful of journalists arrived on Petit St. Vincent, known to locals as PSV. With unobstructed beaches, lapped upon by crystalline blue waters, the island's natural surroundings look pre-Photoshopped.

Following a brief tour of the 115-acre resort's sandy hideaways and amenities, we were handed



our itineraries for the trip. Justin would host two hours of lessons in the morning, with two hours of campfire-style jam sessions in the evening. Otherwise, the rest of the days were ours to fill as we chose: enjoy any of the myriad beaches scattered around the island's perimeter; indulge in the free food and drink; book a massage or yoga session; or venture further out to sea for diving and scuba activities.

Yet, as enticing as this R&R sounded, this productivity-obsessed Serious Guitar Journalist was eager to get down to business – namely, the act of reconnecting with the guitar.

Cue Justin Sandercoe. One of the first educators to make it big on YouTube, launching his channel way back in 2006, Justin doesn't do in-person teaching outside of the occasional six-string celeb, making this a rare opportunity to learn face-to-face from one of the world's top instructors.

Each day, journalists and guests would convene in the morning to cover fundamental subjects, from chords and embellishments, to pentatonic scales and 12-bar blues shuffles.

Rather than get bogged down in theory, Justin's approach encourages students to put their skills into practice straight away, teaming up with a partner to divvy up rhythm and lead – an approach honed over his years of hosting guitar retreats in rural Italy.

Guests on the course tend to be at a similar level in terms of technical ability, usually having completed the first steps on Justin's course – but as he notes, there are clear benefits to that person-to-person experience.

"They're people who know the chords, they can strum, they might have the pentatonic scale," Justin explains. "But it's amazing the amount of times I can technically help somebody here in person and go, 'Your hand's in an awkward place!' and they respond, 'Ah, now it works!' – that's where this stuff is really beneficial compared to online."

This one-on-one tuition is tailored to each student – for example, while I definitely know my way around a pentatonic scale, Justin was happy to push me further into arpeggio territory, or challenge me to solo using only two strings, putting the emphasis firmly on melody and timing rather than blazing through muscle-memorised patterns.

These skills would be put to use in late-afternoon, campfire-style jam sessions, which saw students pair up and perform songs, with other guitarists encouraged to join in as Justin signalled the chord changes. In fact, Justin highlights this as perhaps the most important aspect of the learning experience.

When quizzed on what attendees are looking for from these events, his answer is instantaneous. "Playing with other people," he responds. "Students say, 'I haven't played in front of someone before – for the first time, I want to do it.'"

Nerves are, naturally, an important factor for everyone on the course – myself included – and, accordingly, Justin caters to that anxiety. "It's about learning about your heartbeat increasing. When you explain to somebody why they're scared of stuff and what you can do about it, it very often removes the fear," he explains.

"Anything that might be slightly scary is about being prepared for all possible things. Sometimes you might crash and burn on guitar, but as long as you're aware of all of those problems that might occur – that your hands might get sweaty, and you feel a bit weird – then it makes it a lot easier."

> **"SOMETIMES YOU MIGHT CRASH AND BURN ON GUITAR, BUT AS LONG AS YOU'RE AWARE OF ALL OF THOSE PROBLEMS THAT MIGHT OCCUR – THAT YOUR HANDS MIGHT GET SWEATY, AND YOU FEEL A BIT WEIRD – THEN IT MAKES IT A LOT EASIER."**

MAB UNPLUGGED

Of course, as I could attest, practicing guitar is altogether more pleasant when you've got limitless sunshine and stunning vistas to accompany your woodshedding. Petit St. Vincent is set up as a series of 22 cottages – mine was located near the island's dock, and blessed with its own private beach, complete with loungers and that Caribbean essential, the hammock.

It's also that little bit easier to knuckle down when you don't need to worry about food, drink or transport. There are three members of staff for every guest on the island, and there's a smart way of calling upon any of the generous personnel.

Each cottage has a flagpole; guests mark out their desired food, drink, activity booking, taxi, etc, on one of the supplied forms, then raise the flag. Staff are constantly roaming the island, and will pick up your order and deliver it at your desired time. You can do the same at any of the secluded beaches located around PSV, too.

Another vital ingredient in creating the perfect environment for practice is the fact that the island cuts back on many of the modern-day conveniences that rob us of precious rehearsal time. General Manager Matt Semark has been running the island retreat for ten years, and thinks its unplugged ethos

fits perfectly with Justin's tuition.

"Consciously not installing things like TVs or Wi-Fi in the cottages and other guest areas allows the participants to focus on learning in a beautiful environment without any distractions," he says. "Obviously it also offers a decent excuse for the guitarist to be 'allowed' to come and play, as their partners are able to enjoy the rest of the island and facilities, like the spa, watersports and scuba diving, and generally don't mind tagging along."

As a city break kind of traveller, I don't tend to bring guitars with me on sojourns abroad, so having an acoustic at my side was a real novelty on this trip. Justin had reached out to Journey Instruments to procure a carbon-fibre travel guitar for the occasion, and the company ended up furnishing guests who hadn't brought their own acoustics.

This was my first time spending any serious time with a guitar with a removable neck, and while I would have probably tinkered with the action given more time, I was impressed by its stability and surprisingly punchy tone. We were well catered for in the accessories department, too, with a copious supply of picks, strings, a capo and a headstock tuner, courtesy of D'Addario, while Justin supplied his course materials and songbooks.

As a result, my moments away from the course – while peppered with exploratory adventures in scuba diving and snorkelling – were more often than not spent with a guitar at my side. Turns out a Caribbean beachside view did wonders for my motivation.

With no distractions, I found myself reconnecting with the guitar at a core level: taking in the resonance of every ringing chord, accompanied by the sea breeze and the distinctive cry of the island's native birds. If ever there were a case for the benefits of mindfulness on guitar playing, this was it.

POWER OF PSYCHOLOGY

What also came as a surprise was just how much I gained from the course. Given I've been playing for nigh-on a quarter of a century, I was one of the more experienced players in attendance, but the lessons I took away were related to the mental rather than physical aspects of learning.

> "THE TRIP HAD GIVEN US ALL A CHANCE TO UNPLUG, AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO FULLY ENGAGE WITH THE INSTRUMENT..."

Justin's approach deals with the psychology of playing as much as it does the rudimentary physicalities – ways to make practice easier, confront fears, deal with frustration when you don't get it right – and that proved to be beneficial for everyone, no matter their skill level.

"I've always been into the psychology of learning and I've studied neural and linguistic programming," Justin explains. "So I'm really into how we think and how we learn. I've been trying to figure out how I can 'trick' a student into getting over their fears or finding a new way of doing something, or realising how important practice is. I like to think that some of my enthusiasm in that area makes me different to other teachers that just teach whatever stuff they like."

This proved to be a powerful shared experience among journalists and guests alike – the very human realisation that we all go through the same stumbling blocks and encounter the same mental obstacles, whether we're learning a new chord or a particularly advanced solo.

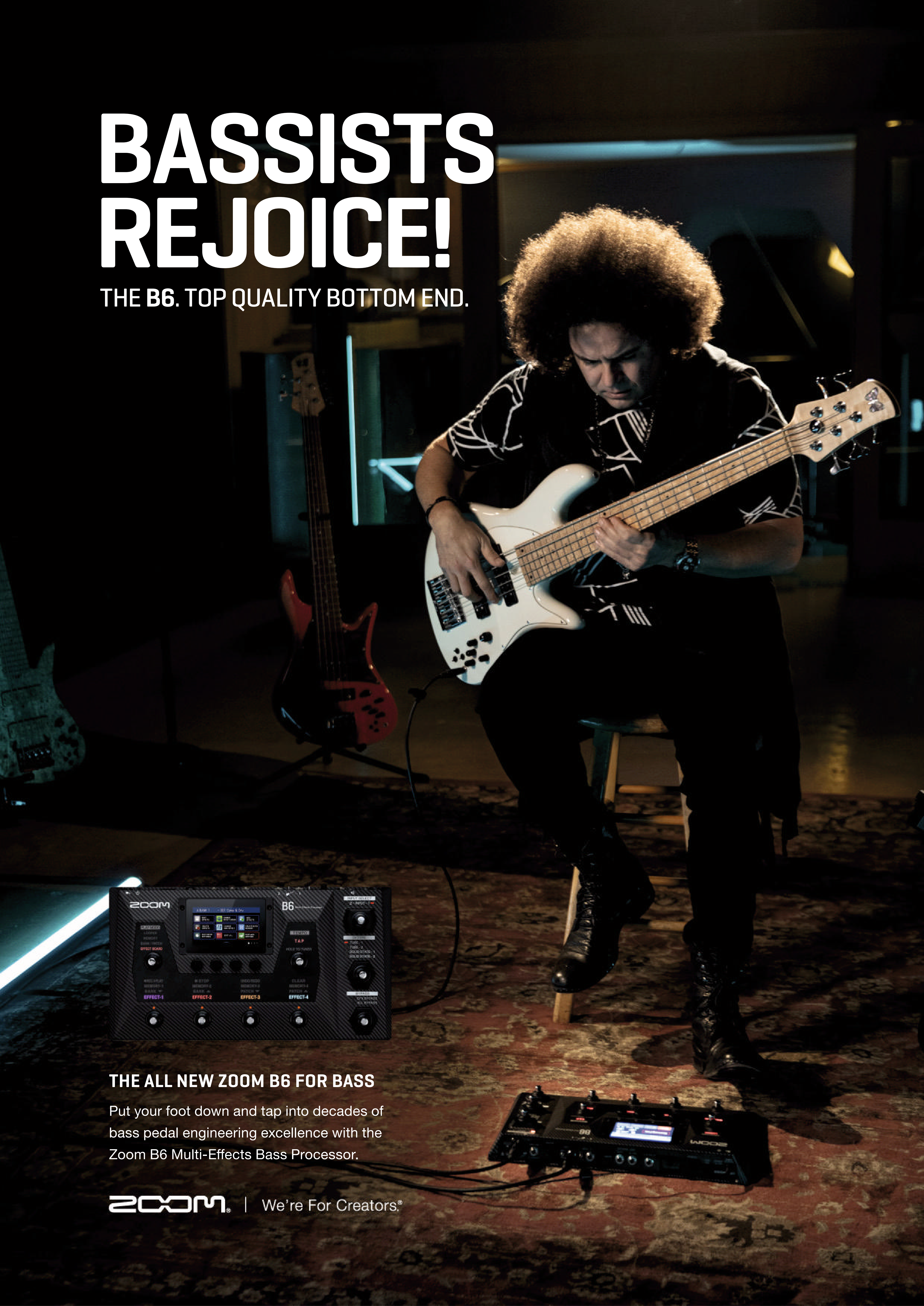
The sessions were also beneficial for island manager Matt, who admits he had an ulterior motive for booking Justin to host a workshop at PSV, given he's a guitarist himself. "It was the first time I had actually played along with others," he says of the lessons. "I really loved the help with learning to sync with another guitarist and take turns soloing over the other's chords.

"Because we covered so many different aspects over the week, it allowed me to try a few new things, and gave me a better understanding of what I liked more and where I will focus my next stages of learning. I'm aiming to improve enough to be able to confidently play a song by myself on the next workshop in July '22!"

The course ended with a final performance, which saw journalists and guests perform in front of one another in a slightly more formal – but no less encouraging and friendly – setting. I tackled 'Norwegian Wood' and 'Hey Joe' in two different pairings, and found great satisfaction in revisiting these simple joys. With band practices put on hold over the pandemic, it was a welcome pleasure to sit alongside another human being and conjure a collaborative performance from seemingly nowhere.

Not only did my time at PSV allow me to reconnect with the acoustic, but I rediscovered part of myself – the teenage guitarist who played for the love of progress, discovery and making music with others. For whom achievement didn't require recorded proof, as it did back in my home studio; instead, you felt that sense of accomplishment with every conquered performance and each new chord, riff or lick.

In short, it brought me back to myself. And the sense of wonder on my face mirrored the expression on everyone else's. The trip had given us all a chance to unplug, and an opportunity to fully engage with the instrument – and there aren't many vacations that can offer relaxation and motivation in such perfect harmony.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THE NEW WAVE

Sometimes guitar design seems to evolve as slowly as a maple tree grows – little by little, with deep roots in tradition. But every now and then, a storm comes along that uproots settled ways, and we are in the midst of such a time now. The good news is that players are getting better and more highly developed guitars than they've ever had before – regardless of genre. In this feature, we examine why guitar design is undergoing a renaissance in the wake of the pandemic, rounding up the best of 21st century lutherie and talking to some of the prime movers in guitar innovation about the new wave of guitar and what it means for players everywhere.

Words by **Jamie Dickson**. Photos by **Neil Godwin**.

It's become a cliché that guitarists don't 'do' progress. Certainly, there's no denying that battered Tweed amps and old Les Pauls are magical things - and there's a reason they're still benchmarks for a certain kind of tone and a certain kind of player. But, as we emerge slowly from the pandemic, there are signs that a genuine renaissance in guitar design is happening - and that it's being driven by player demand.

The pandemic has played a role in that. Prior to the world locking down for a year, webcasting and using social media as the main outlet for your music was just a rising trend. Now it feels central. Other norms are crumbling, too. It used to be that only flawlessly black ebony passed muster on a fingerboard, but now players are hip to figured ebony. That's partly because it's a less wasteful choice in a world that's running out of natural resources - non-black ebony used to be left to rot in forests if a tree was felled and found to contain 'inferior' figured wood inside - but it also looks great.

Mexican-built Fenders now come shipped with pau ferro fingerboards, not rosewood - and to be fair not everyone likes the look of that - but the sky hasn't fallen in yet and it does the job well. Taylor is making guitars out of trees harvested from city streets that would otherwise have been made into garden mulch. The times they are a-changing, to be sure.

Some of the changes in how guitars are being made are due to long-term issues, including depletion of natural resources. Others, such as supply chain logjams, are short-term consequences of the pandemic. But, as terrible as it has been in most respects, the pandemic also persuaded large numbers of people to take up the guitar for the first time. Andy Powers, master luthier at Taylor Guitars, says this sudden influx of new players is a huge deal and will have lasting consequences for the guitar industry.

"It would be impossible for us to ever go back to what we once thought of as normal now," Powers reflects. "Within the music world, changes are always driven by players - or maybe I should say that the acceptance of changes is driven by players. And so when you look at the guitar world, you now have a larger set of potential players active at any one time: you have people that you would call baby boomers, you have people you'd call millennials. You have the kids of millennials... you have a big swathe of the population who are now all interested in playing guitar and all active at the same time. And while that's going on, you have a wider range of styles, genres, repertoire, technique and ways to use a guitar than you ever have at any one time.

"There used to be a fairly small, very narrow way to use a guitar and it would get shifted from season to season," Powers continues. "Let's say if you were making music, it was a fairly predictable avenue: maybe your success was defined as 'playing guitar in a band on a record that was receiving

radio airplay'. Well, that's not the case now. You might find you have an audience for your music via YouTube, via a social media channel or some outlet that way. It might be in traditional records. It might be in a live-only, small-community setting where you have a regular following and people want to go to a coffee shop to hear this one musician every week do their residency. There is a nearly infinite number of avenues for somebody to be making music."

Growing numbers of people taking up guitar plus a huge expansion in guitarists using social media to reach their audience is already changing the landscape of guitar design, Powers argues.

"There's such a fragmentation going on. There is no clear, single path for a guitar player to be using their guitar any more. And I think that's wonderful because it's a far more inclusive musical environment than it ever has been. So, at the same time, you have a larger swathe of the population interested and active in playing guitar. You have a wider number of outlets for people to share and participate or interact with their music. And you have an appetite for more unique, different kinds of sounds to fit in these different environments. So, to me, it feels like this perfect storm that's a new lift-off era for the guitar itself."

TAKING IT ACROSS THE POND

That lift-off effect is not limited to American makers, either. For example, Britain has always produced great custom-built electrics. Now the UK seems to have two makers, in Gordon Smith and PJD Guitars, that are building high-quality electric guitars in significant numbers and for a price that makes them a mass-market proposition. These guitars are not ungainly oddities, either – they look and sound as good as anything built across the pond. With post-pandemic shipping prices from China and Indonesia rising ever-higher, suddenly building guitars closer to home is looking more attractive.

Guitar makers have found themselves in an economic hall of mirrors where guitars that were once far cheaper to produce overseas are now, in some cases, viable to build at home – with no international shipping delays to contend with, either. Amp maker Laney, for example, recently brought production of its Lionheart amps back to the UK. Auden, a high-quality acoustic brand that is stablemate to Gordon Smith Guitars, has up to now done initial construction of its acoustics in China with neck-set and final finish being completed in Higham Ferrers in Northamptonshire. They're now going to be built 100 percent in the UK.

"We have started the process of moving the full production of Auden into the UK from the Far East," says Auden and Gordon Smith owner, Doug Sparkes. "Currently, the wooden shell [unfinished body] is made in a small workshop in China. But with the world's current global supply chain difficulties, it actually now makes economical sense to move into the UK. But at the same time, it's also something I've always wanted to do so it's sort of the last part of the jigsaw in terms of supporting British manufacturing, which, as you know, is something I'm really passionate about. So I'm really excited and pleased by it."

The general situation is still volatile, however, and makers who have spread their bets between overseas and domestic production are best placed to cope, argues Adrian Ashton, CEO of Manson Guitar Works, the Devon-based brand that crafts Matt Bellamy of Muse's futuristic stage instruments but also affordable modern electrics made in partnership with giant overseas guitar maker Cort.

"What we've seen in the last couple of years, I don't think anyone could have dreamed up," Ashton says. "And you've got to be ready to change and adapt to those conditions. Fortunately, we have such a mixed portfolio. We do have a guitar that is just over £500 retail, which is manufactured overseas. We also have a full-custom guitar that is manufactured totally in-house in the UK, and we have what I call our 'production custom', which is a mix of both of those elements. So when the market changes, if you have a flexible portfolio, you can adapt to those changes. If you're stuck in one direction, you have to continue in that direction just to generate the funds to keep the company going."

Ashton also echoes Powers' words about an explosion in the number of musicians who are using guitars in non-conventional ways.

"The guitar world has changed drastically in tune with the world," he reflects. "It's just fantastic that we're seeing many, many more singer-songwriters with all sorts of backgrounds and diversity so it's not just a trio or a quartet pounding out rock: it can be all these different styles and things merging together. Even if you just look at something like

the hip-hop world, well, how do you make a guitar that's relevant to that style of music? But with our MIDI screen, we actually do have an instrument that's very relevant to that work. So diversity in design is important. Perhaps we're not celebrated for it as much as for the crazier stuff we make, but we do make an MA guitar with just a bridge and a neck pickup and nothing else wild on it. But we also make the same guitar with a MIDI controller on it or a Fuzz Factory installed."

INTERESTING TIMES

So, what does this all mean for the evolution of guitar? Taking the above factors into consideration, it's clear that there are some real themes developing in guitar design. Some small-volume makers are taking the best of the past and refining it, raising the craft to a new level of attention to detail and hand-built quality. Good examples of that include makers such as Patrick James Eggle in the UK and Nik Huber in Germany or Suhr in the US. These brands aren't about utility mass-production but handcrafting superlative instruments with classic roots in sufficient numbers to make the exercise much more than just a cottage industry. PRS has taken that concept and gone even further, becoming arguably the first 'boutique' mega-brand.

In fact, many major guitar brands are now looking to build guitars that meet the needs of players who want highly evolved features and performance in a classic-looking package. Ibanez's AZ range is a great example of that, as is Fender's new Mexican-built Player Plus line. Interestingly, demand for such instruments at an affordable price point has been driven by players such as Guthrie Govan popularising guitars from the previous category – boutique high-performance instruments based on classic platforms.

So AZ and Player Plus can be seen as mainstream outgrowths from the YouTube success of technically outstanding players who were no longer satisfied with 'pointy headstock' guitars to play their music, which has proven to be more soulful and eclectic than shred ever was. These guitars are being made to a very high standard in serial production everywhere from the US to Mexico, Japan and Indonesia, meaning mainstream, premium-quality guitar making is now truly international.

Joining the big names in this enterprise are rising British makers such as Gordon Smith and PJD, who again aim to offer high-performance modern guitars that have classic roots. What sets the latter two brands apart is their proud determination to make as much as possible of their instruments in the UK – a move that is, for the moment, in step with the economic realities of our time. Right now, shipping parts in from overseas can be costly and unpredictable, especially for growing brands that don't have the financial might to simply wait out economic storms and have to be nimble and adaptable to survive. So those factors are driving a small renaissance in guitar making in this country, creating another trend.

Lastly, we have paradigm-shifting innovators, such as .strandberg and, in respect to at least some of their output, Manson Guitar Works. These brands cater to artists who want to use the guitar in entirely new ways. In the case of Manson Guitar Works, this might mean empowering the guitarist to control digital devices via the use of onboard MIDI controllers. In the case of Taylor, on the acoustic side, it means making compelling guitars from unorthodox, sustainable tonewoods such as Urban Ash. Other makers still are looking closely at the rise of young, technically minded players who want to distance themselves entirely from the rock 'n' roll roots of guitar.

"You've now got this new breed of player who really has a disdain for anything pre-1998," comments Lee Wrathe, a stellar guitarist who's well known for his official demos of Ibanez instruments. "You've got characters like Tim Henson, from the band Polyphia, referring to standard blues licks and bends as 'boomer bends'. It really winds me up, to be honest with you! So you've got that and then you've got people who are creating music in a different way. There's Ichika Nito, who is the Japanese signature-model artist for the new Ibanez Quest [headless guitars]. Ibanez, just like they did with the JEM and the RGs back in the '80s, have gone, 'Okay, who is the next person we should be going to? It's a new venture, exciting. Let's go and find those players... We want to be capturing the hearts and minds of the followers of these new guitar heroes,' if you like. So they've asked them the question: 'What do you need?'

"The kind of music they play almost sounds like a music box. The way they tap on the guitar is almost piano-like. It's a little like what Jennifer Batten would have done back in the day. The way they typically sit to perform also creates an angle on the guitar that means that their fretting hand is having to do different things, so Ibanez has gone, 'Well, we'll just angle the frets, then.' They haven't gone, 'Right, okay, we'll just take a standard fanned-fret guitar and do that,' because that would then change the scale length and all of that. They've kept it the same, but they've just angled the frets and worked out that an eight-degree slant is the one for them."

Whether you like the almost avant-garde music being made by younger players who reject the blues lineage of rock 'n' roll, there's no doubt that it's popular. Ichika Nito has 1.7 million subscribers on his YouTube channel and Polyphia's geometrically intricate track 'G.O.A.T.' has been viewed on YouTube 23 million times. But look beneath the surface and there's a further twist to the tale, as Wrathe explains.

"When you look at the pickups of the Quest guitars, here's the very interesting thing. One of the things that might factor into how new guitars are designed these days, in the current climate, is that the lack of supply of certain parts has a knock-on effect in terms of what the design of the next guitar is going to be. So with the Quest guitars, we don't see DiMarzio pickups in there. We don't see Seymour Duncan. We don't see any third party pickups. We see Ibanez pickups in there, partly because they're easier to get hold of. But they've done a wonderful job on them for their intended purpose."

So here, at the bleeding edge of design, we find a world in which almost all the norms of guitar making in the 20th century have been turned on their head by logistics, economics and, most importantly, player demand. Interesting times, indeed.

PEDAL TO THE METAL

AS TECHNOLOGY EVOLVES, SO TOO DOES A GEARHEAD'S BIGGEST DILEMMA: DO YOU SWING FOR THAT LOFTY, THOUSAND-DOLLAR MULTI-EFFECTS PEDAL, OR STOCK UP ON A HEAP OF INDIVIDUAL PEDALS EACH SUITED FOR THEIR OWN PURPOSE? HERE, WE'LL LOOK AT THE PROS AND CONS OF RUNNING ONE MULTI-FX UNIT VERSUS MULTIPLE STOMPBOXES.

WORDS BY **ALEX LYNHAM**.

So, where do you stand on the age-old argument of running a multi-effects pedal vs. individual pedals? When you think about it, there's basically two main categories of guitar effect. There's effects that add gain to the signal. These generally increase the amplitude and in doing so add harmonic distortion. Enough gain, and the waveform will clip. If more clipping is desirable, diodes can be used to either 'soft-clip', or 'hard-clip' the waveform shape. This covers all boosts, drives, distortions and fuzzes.

Then there's effects that delay the signal in some way. Choruses and flangers delay a copy of the signal and manipulate it with an LFO, while delays and reverbs play it back. At the deep core of things, the same theory, maths and principles apply.

We've glossed over some utility types and filters, but you get the idea. Where we're going with this is that, by the end of the '90s, a single DSP (Digital Signal Processing) chip was more than powerful enough to run common algorithms for gain and delay-based effects. Since similar signal processing code was used, having many in one pedal then became just saving these algorithms to memory.

The Zoom 505 was the first of these, released in 1996, but many have since followed. It wasn't until the early 2000s however that multi-effects could really compete with discrete pedals. Not only that, but some came with amp modelling, claiming you could ditch your tube amp. Companies like Line 6 led the charge here, but for a few years, it was still more hype than reality.

The crucial thing that changed was that in the late 2010s it became possible to put much more powerful DSP chips in units, at a consumer price-point. Moreover, the same was true of the analogue-digital-analogue, or ADA conversion needed. 24bit, or even 32bit was now possible, at your feet. As a result, modern floorboards can be as powerful as rack studio gear.

Fast forward to today, and multi-effects are just a dedicated computer to process your guitar.

The levels of sonic flexibility now would have been impossible 20 years ago. But are they a viable alternative to running a bunch of individual pedals? It's complicated. Allow us to dig into the pros and cons of each approach.

MULTI-EFFECTS

WHAT IS IT?

As described earlier, a multi-effects unit is a self-contained guitar effect processor. Usually they support running multiple effects at once, in series, and sometimes also in parallel. There's often complex routing schemes on offer too. High-end units like the Line 6 Helix and Axe-FX series allow for parallel signal chains, including multiple amp setups.

As implied by this, you'll also find IR – impulse response – loading capabilities on many modern units. This allows you to model the sound of a real-life speaker cabinet to make amp simulations sound more 'alive' or 'organic'. Of course, not all amp simulations are created equal, but these days a high-end amp sim with decent IRs is indistinguishable from the real thing. The amount of Axe-FX, Kemper and Line 6 gear used live and on modern records bears this out.

PROS

FLEXIBILITY

This will change depending on how much you've got to spend. Some units have an incredible amount of flexibility, both in effect types and the routing options available to you. Generally, smaller or cheaper units will have less processing power. Even if complex routing options are available, as on the Line 6 HX Stomp, for example, you'll only be able to run a couple of effects at once.

RANGE OF HIGH-QUALITY SOUNDS

Modern high-end units are basically indistinguishable from the pedals and amps that they model, with improvements in IR technology largely doing away with the flat and fizzy amp sims of old. Anecdotally, we've also increasingly seen and heard of artists using cheaper floorboards in the studio. Sometimes because it is just there, and sometimes because what's more important than the sound is getting the idea down before it escapes.

Finally, there's another point – some sounds aren't things that necessarily fit your style. You might not be able to justify a wah pedal on your board, but having one available via a multi-FX might result in it breaking your writer's block one day in the future.

Having too many options can easily lead to option paralysis, but it can also leave new avenues open for you to explore at will. It's a fine line to get right, but even if you don't need them today, having the effects available might be useful.

ERGONOMICS

Multi-effects are the most ergonomic guitar effect solution, hands down. They're compact, self-contained, easily portable, and can even replace your guitar amp entirely, both at home and in the studio. Even if you're playing smaller venues without a house PA, you can get a powered speaker or power amp and run a cabinet on-stage, with only your multi-effect in front of it.

PRICE

Given the amount of potential sounds in a unit, there's no competition on value for money. Buying even budget mini pedals to cover the same sounds would likely be many times the cost, and that's ignoring the whole discussion of amp simulators and IRs entirely.

CONS

FLEXIBILITY

Multi-effects are incredibly flexible, but only in the way that they're designed to be. If you do hit the limitations of the unit, and chafe against them, then perhaps a multi-effect isn't for you. Although modern designs are intuitive and modular, they can never be as tactile or modular as compact drive and delay pedals.

PRICE

Even if a floorboard is not that expensive compared to the average pedalboard you see on Reddit or Instagram, it's still a considerable outlay. Especially for a high-end unit, which you'll want if you intend on using amp models, you're looking at the same cost as a decent laptop.

LONGEVITY

Discrete pedals tend to have a longer shelf-life than highly technological solutions. By its very nature, cutting edge tech is soon obsolete, and in some cases, the software can be unsupported. What this means is that you might find it has a life of say, ten to fifteen years thanks to the inherent complexity of the circuitry – and even that may be generous. After all, who's using a 2000s era laptop now? Meanwhile, we have a 1987 Boss digital delay on our pedalboard, and it sounds great.

SO, ANYTHING ELSE I SHOULD KNOW?

There's no wrong answers, even if the choice between different multi-effects seems daunting. Simply make a shopping list of the basic features that you want, and then try a few until you find one that 'clicks'. For our money, how intuitive it

is to use, and the user interface, is actually more important than the sounds. You can't tell this from a YouTube video, so try some in person if you can. Apart from that, always remember the golden rule – if something isn't contributing to achieving your creative goals, then ditch it.

INDIVIDUAL PEDALS

WHAT IS IT?

At its most simple, a pedalboard is several pedals Velcro'd to an old shelf to make them easier to move around. Our first 'board was still powered by batteries, so even a power supply isn't strictly necessary. That said, given that many modern pedals don't support a 9V battery – either for space or environmental reasons – a small pedalboard power supply is likely to be a smart purchase.

Most guitarists start with something like a distortion, fuzz or overdrive, a delay or reverb, a guitar tuner and maybe a modulation of some kind. In just three or four pedals you'll find pretty much endless combinations of potential sounds.

PROS

FLEXIBILITY

There's nothing more flexible than something completely modular, and that's exactly what a pedalboard is. You can change the pedals on the board, change the order, or route them in ways that even their manufacturers didn't intend. For example, the Digitech Whammy IV pitch shifts using a delay buffer, which introduces latency.

By taking the dry out and running two amps, you could create a phase effect by manually moving the rocker. This kind of out-of-the-box thinking and experimentation isn't possible in the same way with a multi-effect.

CUSTOMISATION

In a similar vein, a pedalboard is simply more customisable. A multi-effect is by its very nature restricted by the algorithms it has. Produced by a large musical instrument corporation, its effects are likely to be much more middle-of-the-road, focussed on covering as many bases as possible.

This means that weirdo or exotic effects are often hard or impossible to replicate using large floorboards. The kind of pedals we're thinking of are the likes of the Montreal Assembly Count to 5, Red Panda Particle or Tensor, Hologram Microcosm, Drolo Stammen or Chase Bliss Mood.

ERGONOMICS

Although the ergonomics of pedals on a board is better than pedals on the floor, that's not the thing we want to focus on. Rather, the real ergonomic bonus of pedals over anything else is tactility. We can still remember the first time we got on the floor at a show and twisted the knobs on a Boss delay pedal to make it oscillate.

That kind of rapid feedback, with all the functions of the gear exposed immediately to the user isn't possible with a complex floor processor. User interfaces have improved, no doubt, but there's a visceral thrill that can be had from more simple, or at least more focussed or specialised gear, where all the functionality is accessible at your fingertips.

CONS

PRICE

We mentioned above a set of exotic pedals you could choose from on your 'board. The downside is that each will set you back around $300. Unless you're going for cheap guitar pedals, or are happy with a handful for gigging purposes, a pedalboard can quickly get out of hand in terms of cost.

Our first gigging board, which served us well for five years, cost about $450, so it is possible to build an expressive and fun board without selling a kidney. However, a straw poll of guitarist friends suggests that most have 10-15 pedals on their 'board now. Possibly that's being adults with a job rather than teenagers, but it's an expensive difference.

SIZE

As you can imagine, those 10-15 pedals take up a fair amount of space, and unless you're able to pull off some IQ 9000, 4-D chess, Tetris moves, you might struggle to fit it all. Which means a larger board, which is more money, and more space, so now you can't take the bus to a gig, so you need to get a lift from your drummer… And so on.

SO, ANYTHING ELSE I SHOULD KNOW?

You don't need loads of pedals to create great music. As Jim Ward said: "A good amp, a good guitar, a delay pedal and a volume pedal, and I'm happy. [With] those four things, I've never found the end. I've never run out of ideas, I've never run out of inspiration."

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DIRTY BUSINESS

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WALRUS AUDIO

ERAS FIVE-STATE DISTORTION AND IRON HORSE LM308 DISTORTION

Walrus Audio's two new distortion pedals provide varying flavours of the effect via clipping from silicon diodes, LEDs or both together. However, each takes a different route to dialing it in.

The Eras Five-State Distortion has five hard-clipping options, gain and volume knobs, and very effective tone controls – the treble knob is especially adept at dialling in cutting presence. There's a great variety of dirt on offer, from crunchy drive to high-gain metal tones, and all the clipping modes have something different to offer. The main delineation is between the three Tight modes and the two Rhythm modes, where the scooped mids offer a notably different sonic landscape to the Tight modes' slight mid cut. The cherry on the top is the blend knob, which allows you to mix your dry sound with the distortion for hybrid layered sounds or, more subtly, extra clarity and definition as you roll it back from fully wet.

The Iron Horse LM308 Distortion is the third iteration of the Iron Horse pedal, and it's had quite a revamp over its predecessors. There's now more pedalboard-friendly positioning of the I/Os and a soft-relay true bypass on/off. Significantly, the new version allows continuous morphing from silicon diode to LED clipping. The Iron Horse LM308 Distortion offers distortion based around a LM308 chip as found in a Pro Co Rat, and the sonic similarities are immediately apparent. The tone knob even has that same huge range rolling back from fully bright to dark and woofy. The gain range is very versatile, taking you from a tonally targeted clean boost right through to full-on distortion.

BLACKSTAR

DEPT. 10 DUAL DRIVE, DUAL DISTORTION AND BOOST

Blackstar's new Dept. 10 Series Dual Drive and Dual Distortion pedals both pack an ECC83 (12AX7) tube and have been designed to run at amp-level internal voltages to really get those lightbulbs cooking. But there's a digital twist in the form of Blackstar's new Cab Rig emulation, which, combined with the new Architect software, gives you deep, flexible editing of a virtual cabinet, including choice of speaker and mic, placement and EQ, making it a portable, valve-powered solution for live and recording applications. Both pedals feature regular and dedicated emulated outputs, three-band EQ, Blackstar's ISF control, an effects loop, and USB for use as an audio interface.

Blackstar's new series also includes the Dept. 10 Boost, which sets itself apart from the Dual pedals by being aimed at a more traditional pedalboard setup. You won't find any digital wizardry here. Instead, this pedal aims to give your board a bump that Blackstar says is akin to adding two hot gain stages to your chain. The Peter Baxandall-style EQ circuit is known for its smooth, wide-sweeping tonality and delivers rich second-order harmonics and natural compression.

WAMPLER

PANTHEON DAUL OVERDRIVE DELUXE

The Wampler Pantheon's interpretation of a "Blues Breaker" stomp box captured all the tonal nuance of the original, but with added flexibility and style. The new Pantheon Deluxe lets you dial in two channels of organic creamy gain, gritty overdrive or heavy distortion. Channel 1 delivers a classic Blues Breaker tone, while Channel 2 is a recreation of the original Pantheon, a similar circuit to the Blues Breaker but with a modern boutique feel. Independent side-mounted voicing and gain level switches allow you to further shape your tone to perfection. The Dual Pantheon offers a staggering 200 combinations of gain settings, features dual inputs and outputs, and – a first for Wampler – includes MIDI channel switching.

VERTEX EFFECTS

STEEL STRING SUPREME SRV PREAMP

If you love the Dumble-derived tones of Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Johnson or John Mayer, the Steel String Supreme SRV preamp pedal should be on your list. Designed to function as a preamp, it inherits the level, gain, filter and jazz/rock controls from the Vertex Steel String MkII, and goes even further. The output knob determines your first gain-stage level, and fat shapes the lower midrange for extra thickness and body. Clean offers a parallel blend of your clean and effected signal, and the three-way Bright/Deep mode switch delivers a treble boost in the up position, a bass boost in the down position, and is neutral in the middle.

JHS

PACKRAT DISTORTION

JHS founder Josh Scott examined 45 versions of famous Rat stompbox and authentically reproduced their circuits, accounting for drift from the ageing components. The result is the PackRat, a pedal that offers nine vintage and hard-to-find replications – not emulations – of the iconic Rat distortion pedal. The PackRat uses a proprietary digital runway system to direct the paths of 261 components through 40 individual switches, giving you the exact same circuitry as the origin

TC ELECTRONIC

ZEUS DRIVE OVERDRIVE

The all-analog Zeus pedal delivers thunderous overdrive, giving your guitar signal a boost without affecting its dynamic range. The result is thick, warm distortion, with an outstanding dynamic response. The drive control progressively blends overdrive with a buffered clean signal to deliver transparent, amp-like tone and response.

The Zeus pedal forgoes the standard tone control for a treble attenuator that lets you dial in your highs without thinning the lower frequencies. Better still, engaging the Fat switch induces luxuriously warm and enveloping bottom end. TC Electronic stepped up the Zeus's internal voltage, giving it a huge dynamic range and output power via the volume control. An internal DIP switch toggles true bypass and discrete buffered bypass, allowing you to choose the option that's best for your setup.

BOSS

FZ-1W WAZA CRAFT FUZZ

Boss analysed several vintage fuzz circuits and the sounds of the Tone Bender MK I and MK II to create the FZ-1W, a pedal that puts Waza craftsmanship and premium components to work in a classic-sounding fuzz. The FZ-1W has controls for level, fuzz and tone, plus a Vintage/Modern mode switch that selects between the aggressive tone, dynamic touch response and extreme sensitivity to input volume of classic fuzz units and the fatter and more mid-focused tones associated with contemporary music styles. The tone control is designed for deep sculpting, allowing you to get the most out of both modes and making the FZ-1W a wonderfully versatile device for fuzz lovers.

CHEAP AND UNIQUE

MOST OF OUR MODS OR EVEN 'PARTSCASTER' SELF-BUILDS ARE ALL BASED ON A PRETTY SMALL NUMBER OF VERY FAMILIAR CLASSICS. BUT THIS TIME, **DAVE BURRLUCK** DECIDES THAT ENOUGH IS ENOUGH...

Unique is not a word many of us can use when describing the instruments we mod and create. Yes, you might have come up with some wonderful steampunk mash-up, but chances are it'll have a Tele, Strat or Les Paul-like outline. If you're lucky to have anything remotely resembling a workshop to create your own outline then it's a different matter, but I suspect for most of us our chances of creating a uniquely shaped guitar are slight.

Gretsch's G2215 P90 Streamliner Junior Jet Club, however, is certainly pretty unique, isn't it? It's a bound slab-bodied Jet with a wrapover bridge and a humbucker/P-90 pickup complement, plus a very reasonable price. There are three colours, too: Sahara Metallic, Mint Metallic and our Single Barrel Stain. If someone told you Gretsch had made this back in the day – a 'student' guitar – you might not be surprised: it has buckets of retro-Gretsch appeal.

Gretsch's G6131MY-CS Custom Shop Malcolm Young 'Salute' Jet was an inspiration for the mod.

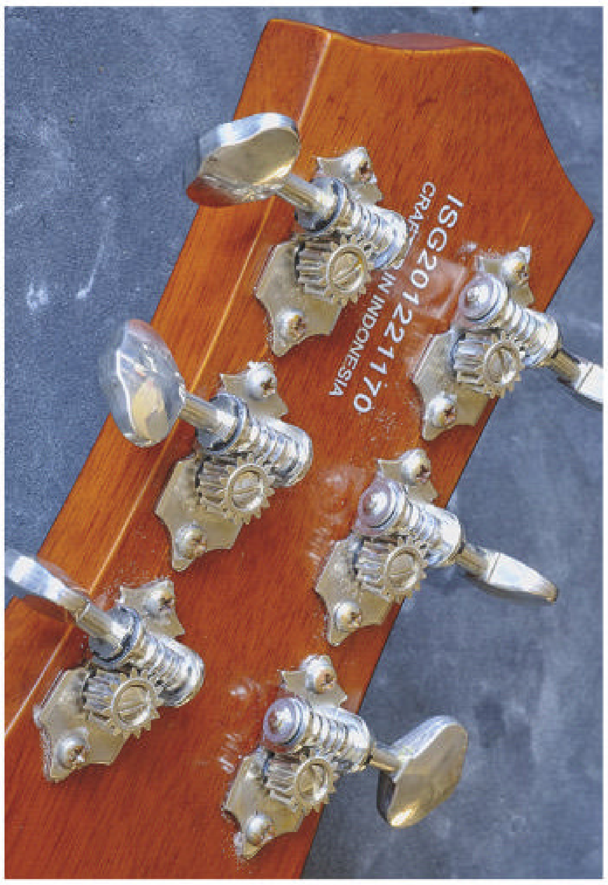
Our work-in-progress Jet Junior mod. Garage rock? You bet!

The lightly aged tuners are not only a functional upgrade they add to the old Gretsch vibe on the simple headstock.

We'd purposely asked Fender to ship it without going through the usual setup, and it's a testament to the quality that, in reality, it was pretty much ready to go. There was a rather too rigid foam pad under the neck P-90 that meant we couldn't lower it to match with the bridge, output-wise; that was easily sorted with some thinner foam.

Then there was an unusual value treble bleed capacitor on the volume control, and adding to its uniqueness, that volume is placed on the treble-side horn, the tone by the bridge and there's a shoulder toggle pickup selector switch – a layout that, even for Gretsch, is pretty bonkers. Each of the three controls is rear-mounted, too, and sits in its own small circular cavity, meaning there's little space for any expansive electronic mods... and rewiring the guitar, as I found, is a little more involved than usual.

The lightly aged Gotoh wrapover with the original steel posts.



These Gotoh SE780 tuners are deceptively simple and use 'Rock Solid' string posts with a 1:15 gear ratio.

But if we class our Jet Junior as unique in style, anyone can buy one, right – so it's really not that unique at all, is it? How can we personalise this good-for-the-money start-up guitar? One obvious route would be to fit a Bigsby and, while we're at it, maximise its style with a couple of TV Jones pickups. Pretty simple mods, in theory, but ones

T-TOP TIME

The original PAF era gradually ended in the early '60s, as new winding machines gave more consistent turns that were also equally consistent from coil to coil. The plain enamel coil wire was changed around 1964 to a less expensive type with a polyurethane coating, suggest Mario Milan and James Finnerty in their 2018 book, *The Gibson "P.A.F." Humbucking Pickup: From Myth To Reality*.

Then, around 1965, we're told the moulding of the bobbins was altered, still of the same butyrate (which changed around '67 to ABS plastic) but with no square holes and a large 'T' embossed on each bobbin hence the T-top nickname. Along with the 42-gauge poly wire, most sources state the early T-tops used short Alnico V magnets (although ThroBak uses Alnico II), which is one reason they're perceived as sounding brighter than the earlier PAF. As the years progressed there were other changes before the T logo bobbins were dropped (by 1980), the key period being the late '60s/early '70s.

The T-top was standard on pretty much any humbucker-spec Gibson electric during a rich time for music and guitar playing. It powered many a guitar great: BB King to Mick Ronson, Jimmy Page to James Williamson, oh, and Angus Young – just the tip of the T-berg.

With the combination of the different components and more consistent winding (which typically gives an average DCR of around 7.5kohms), the unpotted pickups sound "different to PAFs, but not as different as some people would have you believe", reckons Ash Scott-Lockyer at Oil City Pickups. "The chief difference is that both coils were wound with the same number of turns, unlike the rather erratically wound PAF. This, combined with the bright A5 magnet that most use, makes for a biting and aggressive-sounding pickup. True, low in output by modern standards – especially in the bridge position – but [they're] quite happy when used under heavy drive."

that will easily double our outlay. Down the road that might be something to consider, but with gigs back on the horizon I'm tempted to see if a more functional makeover can lift its style and sound without breaking the bank.

WHAT'S THE PLAN?

We're big fans of lists here, but all too soon we've filled a few pages of A4 and we're still pondering our makeover ideas: 'Vintage Gretsch', 'Garage Rocker', 'More Tele?', 'Metal Machine'... and more. Eventually, I decide to mix and merge a couple of themes, spurred on by Gretsch's G6131MY-CS Custom Shop Malcolm Young 'Salute' Jet: 'Vintage Gretsch' meets 'Garage Rocker'. What if...

But style without substance isn't necessarily going to create a guitar that you want in your hands during a gig. Writing recently about Gibson's Murphy Lab Les Paul Junior and then the Vintage V120 (which resides at the other end of the market) gets me thinking. Let's face it, the Junior is all about simplicity. It's the same with Malcom Young's guitar: the anecdote to the 'perfect' modern guitar. It might look completely knackered, but it was an instrument that helped power one of the biggest rock bands ever. But unless there's something going on in the first place, you're not going to play it.

So, how would you not only give it some vibe – in both looks and sound – but make it perfectly gig-ready? Stable tuning is a must, the guitar needs to ring, and while we're not after numerous different sounds, the primary voice really needs to be good. A Junior's one-piece wrapover bridge is about as simple as it gets and, to me, it's the heart of the Junior. A lightweight aluminium wrapover won't cost much, and if you're going to seriously gig a guitar, treat yourself to some good tuners. Add in a bone nut and we should have this Junior working at its best. As ever, we can't change the basic chassis.

SOUND THINKING

Strung up, our Junior's new hardware and aged persona give it quite a different vibe that ticks our concepts wishlist nicely. The guitar plays well, and those tuners are super smooth and very stable. Without any pickups or controls, it certainly nods towards Malcom Young's Jet, and that inspires me to revoice the guitar, initially at least, with a single bridge pickup and simple circuit – the essence of a Junior and perfect for our garage-rock aim. I choose a couple of new CTS pots – I go for a 500k volume and 250k tone, wired vintage style, with a .022 microfarads cap, just like my own real '57 Junior. With these, I'm hopefully going to be able to replicate at least some of that guitar's

Inspired by Cream T's Original Banger (left), the Gretsch Broad'Tron BT-2S (right) has half its screw slugs removed – the lower three of the top coil and the top three on the lower coil nearest the bridge.

Cutting back the gloss finish with wet and dry paper on a cork block.

The next stage is to hand buff the flattening finish – here I'm using some Farecla G3 scratch remover paste.

After ageing, clean your parts with water and leave to dry.

versatility. I just need a pickup.

Malcom's guitar has a TV Jones Filter'Tron Classic at bridge, which will cost around $250, so that's off the cards for the time being. So I reinstall the Broad'Tron BT-2S and, while it's good, I'm taken back to a rather generic hot 'bucker sound, when I'm imagining something with a more clarity and character. But it's worth spending time with what you have – and inspired by Cream T's Original Banger, co-designed with Billy F Gibbons, I experiment with removing the screw poles – the lower three of the top coil, and the top three on the lower coil nearest the bridge. For Gretsch tweakers, this is a common mod, and it certainly gives the Broad'Tron a little more 'single coil' and Gretsch-y bite and seems to pull back the output a little. To lessen the effect, instead of removing the poles you can screw them down into the pickup. It's close, but then I make a couple of mistakes...

First, I plug in the loaned '72 Gibson Les Paul Deluxe with its vibey bridge humbucker voicing and realise I have a way to go. Second, I inherited a Gibson Patent Number stickered T-top some years ago that I often use as a reference. Again, like those mini-humbuckers it has a low output (mine measures 7.25kohms; the Deluxe's bridge is 6.72k) and is unpotted.

I go through The Mod Squad's bits box, measuring various 'buckers, and find a 'bucker with a DCR of 7.5kohms and a chrome cover. While this is T-top in style, it looks strange on our aged Gretsch. Plus chrome, unlike nickel, is harder to age. Removing the cover, the pickup is potted. But on this platform, we're in the right ballpark. No, it's not a T-top – it sounds brighter than my (covered) reference with less midrange character – but it's a start, particularly with the old-style circuit, which gives a lot of variation so long as you're happy to use your volume and tone.But with deadlines to meet, it'll have to do! An old-school Gretsch Junior in progress? Definitely.

THE AGEING PROCESS

Aside from what it's actually made of, the big difference between our Gretsch and any evocative old instrument is its finish and condition. Keen modders might consider stripping the polyester finish and getting a nice respray in the sort of nitro that'll crack and craze. All good. Personally, I chose to just knock off the high-gloss sheen that shouts, 'Hey! I'm a new mass-produced guitar.'

After stripping and removing all the parts, I simply cut back the finish to a matt look with 600-grit wet and dry paper lightly dampened with a little water and a small squirt of washing-up liquid. It doesn't take long, but you need to make sure there are no glossy areas left after wiping dry with a clean cloth. Repeat this process with 800-grit and finally 1,000- or 1,200-grit. The finish should now feel super smooth.

You can then hand-polish it with a burnishing cream or scratch remover – add lots of elbow grease – and finally a rub with a good guitar polish. Now, that oh-so-new sheen is replaced not with a relic, but a slightly dulled gloss that looks classier to me, like it's been used and is altogether less mass-produced.

Achieving the same results with the hardware is something you may or may not want to do. Again, I'm not looking for wear, just to knock off the nickel-plate's box-fresh gloss. There are plenty of ways to age hardware, but, personally, I use ferric chloride (etching fluid) diluted one-to-one with water. Just mix up a little in a small jam jar – the ones you get at a hotel breakfast with your jam in are perfect. Then, using a cotton bud, dab on the fluid and work it over the hardware; you'll see it go dull after a few seconds. Dip it immediately into a larger jar of water, then let dry. That's it, really. If you want a little more ageing, or you've missed a bit, just repeat the process.

Remember: nickel-plating isn't all the same. Some age more quickly. Personally, I don't like to drop the whole part of a tuner, for example, into the fluid. Doing it in the described fashion takes a little longer but is more controllable and, I think, more realistic to the wear you see on naturally aged nickel-plating.

Obviously, safety first: wear plastic gloves and protective eyewear, and when you're done flush all your jam jars with lots of water, rinse those cotton-buds and dispose.

HOT GEAR

FISHMAN TRIPLEPLAY FC-1

RRP: $499 • dynamicmusic.com.au

Extend the capability of the award-winning TriplePlay wireless guitar controller and breathe new life into your MIDI gear with the new TriplePlay floor controller. With its built-in USB host, multi-function footswitches and MIDI I/O, you can connect sound modules and synths so you don't have to bring your computer to the stage. Three footswitches let you step through TriplePlay patches and change presets on your MIDI devices. You also get access to TriplePlay's built-in tuner, sustain/hold functionality, and route your guitar's pickups through the integrated relay switcher for convenient mixing of guitar and MIDI sounds.

FENDER PS-220E PARLOR

RRP: $1,799 • fender.com

The Paramount PS-220E combines state-of-the-art craftsmanship with vintage-inspired appointments, delivering the best of both worlds. Built with the choice of a solid spruce or solid mahogany top paired with solid mahogany back and sides, the PS-220E features an offset X-bracing pattern that has been carefully refined to optimise resonance and tone. A Fender and Fishman-designed pickup amplifies the tight, articulate tone of the PS-220E's newly designed parlor body shape, while the soundhole-mounted controls preserve the vintage aesthetics.

YAMAHA TRANSACOUSTICS

RRP: $1,199 • au.yamaha.com

Playing guitar in a great sounding room is the most inspiring, engaging playing experience imaginable – far more enjoyable than in a dry-sounding room like a lounge, office or den. Yamaha's TransAcoustic Guitar recreates the incredible experience of playing in a rich, live room without needing any external amplification or effects – just the guitar itself. Whether you're practicing, writing, recording or just playing for fun, the TransAcoustic Guitar will make you play better, longer and with more creativity. Once you've experienced it, you'll never want to play another acoustic guitar again.

VOX MINI GO

RRP: $449 • au.yamaha.com

These amps are lightweight, compact and can be powered by a mobile battery. They also offer powerful and realistic amp models based on those found in the Cambridge50, as well as a newly developed vocoder for talking modulation effects, onboard effects that let you create a diverse range of sounds, a mic input, Aux input, a headphone jack and a rhythm machine that can play back patterns from many genres... All as standard features. Two of the units in this series, the Vox Mini Go 10 and Vox Mini Go 50 feature an onboard looper. These features allow you to deliver your best performance whenever you want, wherever you go.

FAITH PJE LEGACY SERIES (BATCH #2)

RRP: $2,795+ • cmcmusic.com.au

Following up on the success of the first release in the PJE Legacy Series, the second batch sets a new bar for professional excellence. Featuring the Mars drop-shoulder dreadnought (PJE Kanuga), the Neptune baby-jumbo (PJE Saluda) and the Earth orchestra-model (PJE Linville), the Legacy model lineup is genuinely unique. The fine, Canadian Sitka spruce or African Khaya mahogany tops of these guitars have been kiln-aged through a process of torrefication, producing a rich, mellow tone with a mature voicing that would take around 20 years of regular playing to achieve under normal circumstances. The book-matched, two-piece rosewood back and sides also help give the PJE Legacy guitars real power and depth of tone.

KLOTZ PREMIUM TITANIUM CABLE WITH ENGRAVED WALNUT CONNNECTOR SLEEVES

RRP: $134.95+ • cmcmusic.com.au

Already the reference cable in the high-end instrument and microphone cable category, Klotz Titanium is now available in an even more advanced model. The latest model is a feast of elegance, with laser-engraved connector sleeves crafted from walnut wood with matt silk finish and gold contacts. Handmade in Germany using fine craftsmanship and strict quality control, the Titanium's revolutionary design is patent-protected. In addition to sound quality, mechanical properties are also important criteria. In these high-end cables, subsonic noise, microphonics, static and motion noise are virtually eliminated, while signals are transmitted with extraordinary clarity and fidelity. The Titanium delivers convincing performance in every respect.

FENDER GEORGE HARRISON ROSEWOOD TELECASTER

RRP: $5,599 • fender.com

Admired for his inspiring playing ability and songwriting prowess, George Harrison reigns as one of the premier icons in music history. To honor Harrison's venerable career, we created the George Harrison Rosewood Telecaster, a limited-edition tribute that embodies George's elegantly restrained playing style and sound. Based on the original Telecaster created for Harrison by Roger Rossmeisel, this guitar remains true to its heritage with a classic look and the unique tone only an all-rosewood guitar can produce.

GIBSON '57 CLASSIC PLUS PICKUP ZEBRA

RRP: $319.99 • australismusic.com.au

Since their introduction in the late 1950s, Gibson's famous Patent Applied For humbuckers have been considered the ultimate pickup because of their smooth, velvety tone. The '57 Classic Plus uses slightly overwound balanced coils, exactly like the original PAFs of the late 1950s that accidentally received a few additional turns of wire. They are the perfect bridge-position companion to the '57 Classic, delivering just a little more of the sweet stuff without sacrificing any of the rich vintage tone.

ZOOM MS-70CDR CHORUS DELAY REVERB

RRP: $259 • dynamicmusic.com.au

From a warm, vintage sound to a clear, modern tone, the MS-70CDR can do it all. Its powerful line-up of 86 diverse effects includes 16 chorus, 26 delay and 29 reverbs, including classic models from famous brands. In addition, there are more than a dozen flangers, tremolos, vibratos, phasers and other modulation effects – everything you'll ever need, all in one stompbox.

PHIL JONES BASS PE-5

RRP: $429 • egm.net.au

The PE-5 is a pedal designed for bass guitar and upright bass which incorporates a sophisticated five-band EQ and also offers superior function as a preamp, direct box, and signal booster. The PE-5 is engineered with a unique switchable input impedance, which allows the pedal to match exactly to either a magnetic or piezo pickup. It achieves the full band spectrum for either pickup source. In addition, it is a signal booster which compensates for low-output pickups and will also provide ample drive for any amplifier.

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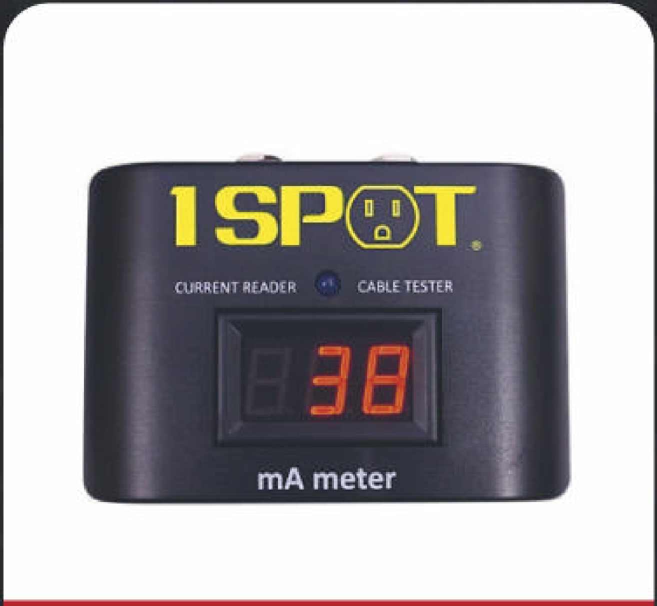

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THE SPACE RACE

ADD AIR AND CLARITY TO YOUR PRODUCTIONS WITH THESE NINE TIPS TO PUTTING MORE SPACE INTO YOUR MIX.

There are many elements that come together in a great contemporary mix, and space is without doubt one of the most important. But what do we mean by 'space'? In the simplest terms, it's clearance between musical parts in terms of frequency ranges and dynamics, as established using EQ, panning, sidechain compression and other basic production processes.

Without sufficient clearance and space, kick drums and basses can all too easily collide, to the detriment of the low end; vocals and synths end up fighting for dominance; and the mix in general becomes flabby, unfocused and messy. With this collection of tips, we'll give you nine proven starting points on which to base your mix-thinning workflow.

1. DON'T GO TOO LOW

Are you a skilled piano player? Good – keep practising! But be careful that you don't automatically double the bass notes you play down the octave. Sometimes that extra bass weight can be great, but sometimes it unnecessarily adds mix clutter.

2. THE POWER OF EQ

EQ is a crucial weapon in the fight against 'mix bloat', enabling you to make both 'general' and 'surgical' choices about which frequencies to enhance or cut. It's easy to fall into the trap of seeing each frequency band as a chance to add more power, and you'll probably remember those early EQ mistakes where, suddenly, you've boosted every band to make everything louder.

As a mix takes shape, however, weeding out unneeded frequencies is essential. The best way to do it is to seek out frequency overlaps and scoop out those bands from 'less important' sounds. For example, are the lowest notes of your pad interfering with the bass? The bassline is probably more important than those low pad notes, so use an EQ to lessen their volume. Equally, are higher notes fighting the vocal? If so, you know what to do.

3. DON'T MIX ON HEADPHONES

Panning can feel unrealistically extreme on headphones, and they don't always give the realistic information required to make good decisions as to what's over-complicating a mix. Monitor through speakers by default and switch to headphones only for 'zooming in' on detail and stereo specifics.

4. BUILD MIX SPACE

Fire up an empty project and the mix fader for the first instrument or audio track will be set to zero decibels (dB) by default. Add a part to this track, then set up another for accompaniment and you may well find that your output channel is already overloading from the weight of both sounds playing together.

Get into the habit of adding a Gain control on each fader, to attenuate the volume of each channel. Or turn the volume of the first track down by 6-8dB before you even play a note. To match its volume, you'll find yourself doing the same to all subsequent tracks, preparing for an easier mix later.

5. PANNING FOR GOLD

Tweak auto-panners to have sounds jump from right to left and back again, missing out the middle ground. Even sounds that momentarily pass through the middle can add unneeded 'central mix' distraction.

6. FOCUS ON THE MIDDLE GROUND

Most sounds sourced from software instruments will be panned centrally, with an even spread of content assigned to the two speakers. If you're trying to focus the listener to mix elements that are supposed to be centrally placed, adding more instruments to this middle ground can often make things difficult. The pan dial is there for a reason and offers an immediate opportunity to move things to the sides, getting them out of the way.

Try to think of sounds in your mixes in pairs – particularly if you've got two pad-like harmonic elements, or twin high percussion lines – panning one to the right and the other to the left.

7. USE SIDECHAIN COMPRESSION

If your track features multiple instruments around the same frequency range, the listener can find it difficult to tell what you want them to hear at any particular point. If this happens and volume balancing doesn't fix the problem, it can help to set up a compressor on 'the less important' track and use the first part as a trigger to duck it a little. This technique can be used across the frequency range, not just on bass sounds. Use your vocal to sidechain compress your pads, or one top-end percussion element to duck another, carving out extra clarity.

8. LOWERING INFLATION

Don't be in any hurry to add an 'inflating' chain of plugins to your output channel. If you're looking for mix space, you can kill any hope of that – easily – right here. Wait until the mix is done!

9. USE HIGH-PASS FILTERS ON THE MIX

If you're setting up a chain of effects on your output channel to control or maximise the final level, including a compressor, be aware that low frequency content and compression don't always make the best of friends. Kick drums and punchy basslines can cause mix bus compressors to duck wildly, sucking energy out of higher frequency content.

To combat this, place an EQ at the top of your output chain and roll out frequencies below 50Hz or so with a high-pass filter set to a 6dB or 12dB slope. The mix could well sound less cluttered and more punchy as a result.

THE END(INO) TIMES

SEATTLE PRODUCTION LEGEND **JACK ENDINO** WAXES LYRICAL ON HIS NEW SOLO ALBUM, *SET MYSELF ON FIRE*, RECORDING **NIRVANA** AND **SOUNDGARDEN**, AND HIS ENDLESS SEARCH FOR RIFFS HE'S NEVER HEARD BEFORE.

WORDS BY **JONATHAN HORSLEY**. PHOTO BY **MAT HAYWARD**.

Jack Endino's name has been on a lot of records, but it remains one of the downsides of being an in-demand producer and mixing engineer that oftentimes your name becomes associated with other people's music. That's not always a bad thing. As Endino joins us from his home in Seattle, the one-time "engine room of the Battleship Grunge" testifies that getting the early works of Mudhoney, Soundgarden and Nirvana on record can be good for your career.

"I tell people who are getting into the recording world, like, 'Your mileage may vary; your first clients when you are learning how to record might not be Soundgarden and Nirvana!'" he says. "I was in the right place at the right time, and grunge is the gift that keeps on giving in that sense because I still have all the business I can handle."

And yet for Endino the recording artist, whose career as a musician came together in the '80s with the alt-metal, grunge-adjacent Skin Yard, those producer credits can be illusory, telling us little about where he is at artistically. Right now that could be with Purple Strange, who are waiting for the pressing plant capacity to put their album out, psych rock act Sky Cries Mary, or Beyond Captain Orca!, Endino's pure improv power trio, or with the release of a new solo album, *Set Myself On Fire*.

An expansive work of alternative rock, *Set Myself On Fire* was once scheduled for a 2012 release before the label at the time fell through. Endino went on to write more songs, eventually finding enough down time to finish it during the pandemic. It is an edgy, wry, quicksilver album with Endino betraying his background as a drummer in how a sleight of hand can render an unconventional groove as one that'll stick in your head.

Endino's songwriting is pinned to the riff, and yet even those also sound subversive and left-field. In some respects, *Set Myself On Fire* is a record from another time, as though written in the same freewheeling spirit that made the '90s such a febrile period for alternative rock and punk. After all, those experiences stay with you, and as much as Endino is keen to talk about this record, above all else he just can't help contextualising his own music with that which he has recorded for others.

For the audience, there can be a 'what the chef cooks at home' perception of a producer's own material, and as it turns out, Endino can't switch off his control room perspective, either. "Recording and playing have always been kind of intertwined for me," says Endino. "It's like two different sides of your brain, your left brain and your right brain, and that's what makes a solo record so difficult. You are trying to use the creative part of your brain instead of the analytical part of your brain, trying to be creative and have fun, and, meanwhile, the other side of your brain is going, 'Well that guitar tone needs some work.'"

And as Endino can testify to, it's only when you bring those two competing instincts into equilibrium that you can get the song done.

Your guitar tone on this record is lush, analog and organic, and there's not that much gain on it.

Yeah, I go for a cleaner sound. Here's the thing: when you have a cleaner sound it forces you to play better, and after doing this for 30, 40 years, I have gotten pretty good on the guitar! [*Laughs*] I can get away it. I am an all right guitar player now. I used to be very insecure, and just tried to play fast all the time because that's what you were supposed to do – it was the '80s, y'know!

With each Skin Yard record, I slowed down more and more. Now, I am more in the Robin Trower/Carlos Santana school of soloing, which is finding two notes and making them sound really good. And fill some space. Try and cast a spell on people with less playing. It's like, how are you playing those two notes? What sort of a feeling can you invoke with the least amount of fiddly-fiddly playing? I am much more interested in that. And also, I like riffs, and this is the thing about my solo stuff: I am always looking for a riff.

And your sound hangs on the riff.

It does, and any band in which I am the main component has always ended up being very riff-y. I mean, Skin Yard was a very riff-y band, and my solo records are riff-fests in a lot of ways. I am the

worst, because I have a giant record collection – I have been listening to music for my entire life – and if I hear something that resembles something that I heard on a record in 1972, then it's out. I don't use it. I am always looking for the riff that I have never heard before, which after 40 or 50 years of being a fanatical music fan is hard to find [*laughs*]!

You like to mix it up rhythmically.

The underlying timing, groove or rhythmic structure of the riff is what makes it interesting – the actual notes might be E, A, D, and everyone has used them, but if it goes in a particular way, and it has a certain lurch to it, suddenly you have a particular shape of a riff that maybe is not so familiar, that people are maybe not so used to hearing over and over again.

I have a couple of punk tunes on the record. There are a couple of four-to-the-floor songs. The last couple of songs are pretty straightforward, but the first three are fairly odd grooves. And that's just normal for me, but now I'm just thinking about it, where's the 4/4? I don't think anything 4/4 happens until the fourth song. I have also been really hard with drummers over my entire life as a musician, because I am always coming up with parts that are hard to play.

Your approach nowadays is not that different to those early production jobs with Soundgarden and Nirvana; just get them in the room and make them play.

No, it's not that different. There's just better technology, better budgets, and I am very savvy with Pro Tools now.

That helps.

You know what the interesting thing about Pro Tools is? It's not what you think it is. When you are working with a band, you can keep the first take! If there is one missing drum hit, then you just edit that drum hit and then the first take is great! In the old days, you might have a magical first take, but, 'Oh, there's a mistake in it! The guy dropped a drumstick in the bridge.'

Now, digitally, you can record the first one or two takes and I can just go, 'Oh! I'll just take the chorus from the second take and drop it into the first take, I'll fix that dropped snare hit and BAM! It's done.' You couldn't do that back in the day recording on two-inch tape.

And it still sounds human. That's the problem when things sound too perfect. It's like a face that's perfectly symmetrical; it doesn't look right.

Leave it in. I don't think there is a drum take on my record that took more than two takes, ever, on any of my solo albums. There were a couple of points where the drummer was speeding up but, if it speeds up, so what? It's music. It's supposed to breathe.

Is that something that you learned from recording bands when there was no time?

Yes, when I had zero budgets to work with 30 years ago, then that would be a factor. You had to make a choice. The other thing was you only had so much tape to record on. And in order to do another take, you had to erase the last one. 'Are we going to erase this take? What if it's better?' Everybody would sorta go, 'Hmm… That's fine!'

What did you use for the guitars on *Set Myself On Fire?*

Well, this is my aesthetic for guitar tone that I've had for years and years. I have a certain way of tweaking the amps, and a certain way of mic'ing the cabs. I am very sensitive to which speakers I am using, like for instance I like Celestion 75s much more than Celestion 30s – or Greenbacks as they're called. Lower-wattage speakers sound a lot more papery to me. They have a fizzy, paper quality; it's brighter, but it's also abrasive to my ears.

And the speakers really matter…

I think the speakers that have heavier voice coils have a darker tone. You can EQ the brightness in but it doesn't sound fizzy and papery. My favorite cab has these things called Celestion GM70s in them, which aren't made anymore. Most people are using the 75s, but they are kinda interchangeable.

In the Skin Yard era, I was mostly using a Fender Twin, with no speakers in it because I had blown the Fender Utahs out of it. It's a '67 Twin. In fact, I still have it; it's called 'The *Bleach* Twin' because Kurt [Cobain] used it on *Bleach*. But it was the main amp I used in Skin Yard. I had the Fender Twin with no speakers, sitting on top of a 4x12 with Celestions, and my guitar tone has always been a Seymour Duncan Hot Rails in whatever guitar I have, a vintage Rat [distortion pedal], some kind of Fender amp, either a Twin or a Bassman. And that's the basic crunch that I get.

Again, your tone is not that dirty. You don't push the Rat.

On the Rat, the distortion knob is never past 10am. It's not too much distortion. The rest of it is amp volume. The mics are usually fairly close to the cone. Maybe one will be close but a little bit off-axis and the other might be at a little bit of a slant. Or, my two different cones with two different mics – maybe a Beta 58, which is my desert island mic for guitars.

I am very conscientious of guitar tones. Amp-wise, since the grunge era way back, I graduated to a 100-watt Fender Bassman because I got tired of dragging a big empty Twin around with me, and I modded it a bit, changed the phase inverter and some capacitors because it was a Bassman and I wanted the circuit to be a little more like a Twin. It's essentially the same components.

A Fender Bassman from the '70s and a Fender Twin from the '70s are almost identical. It's like a bigger transformer, it's voiced a little more low-end on the Bassman.

I have three different guitars and they all have the Duncan Hot Rails in it because I just like the twang I get and the fact that it is not noisy and buzzy, and translates distortion very well. I am a big fan of the vintage Rat. I had an original Rat, but it has disappeared so I have a reissue, and I can tell you Kurt, using my amp on *Bleach*, was using a Boss DS-1, the orange pedal with three knobs. That was his sound in 1989.

Right, and nothing else?

That was on the *Bleach* record. The two or three songs with Dale Crover drumming on *Bleach*, he used his amp which was some kind of Randall solid-state amp, but then when we did the rest of the *Bleach* album a year later, we used my Twin. The first demo I did for Nirvana took five hours and they did 10 songs, and it was recorded and mixed in one afternoon, and then they went and played a show that night.

That was the one and only show of that era that they played with Dale Crover on the drums, January, 1988. The songs were like one take. If a band is really good then all you have to do is get out of their way and make sure the sounds are good, hit 'record' and let them do their thing.

Was Soundgarden a similar one-take story?

When I was recording them it was all eight-track, but we spent so much time on those eight-track recordings, because they had such a clear idea of what they wanted to sound like. They were very rehearsed, and they didn't do anything casually. We would do a few different versions of a song, maybe at different tempos, and Chris [Cornell] was very meticulous with his singing, and Kim [Thayil] was very meticulous with his guitar tones.

In those days, he had a Music Man amp, and a single 15-inch cabinet that he used. He had some kind of flanger/chorus, and that's what most of the guitar on the old Soundgarden was. He had some kind of Epiphone solidbody guitar, a little like an SG. I don't remember exactly.

Did the *Bleach* Twin get used on all the Skin Yard records?

Most of the Skin Yard records were done with the Fender, though on *1000 Smiling Knuckles*, I had a Seymour Duncan Convertible Head. That is a very interesting amp. I still have it – I haven't used it since. It's a strange amp with a strange sound, and it has all these little modules. It's a ridiculous design. It wasn't popular because it wasn't very reliable – as I learned when I tried to take it on the road.

You mentioned that the Bassman-inspired Sovtek Mig-50 has been your main amp since 2010. Have you any other go-to amps?

I am very fond of the Marshall JCM800. I use that for recording even though I don't use it live. And I have another amp called a Zinky Mofo. There was only a 100 of them made. A guy named Bruce Zinky made it in Flagstaff, Arizona. They have been on many, many people's records in the studio. I have various other amps that I use to record with that I wouldn't take on the road, like a Silvertone, a little single 12-inch tweed thing – great for harmonica, pure midrange. I've got a 1978 Marshall JMP. I have got a JCM2000 which I don't like at all, but some metal bands really like that.

Myself, I much prefer more of a Pete Townshend, classic rock sort of schwang to what I do. I am more of a rock 'n' roll guitar player than metal guitar player, so I tend to gravitate more toward clean/crunch as opposed to the scooped-out fizzy kind of thing.

And it's a sound that works with your vocals, which, when all is said and done, are the most important thing. The title track on *Set Myself On Fire* could be taken as an apt description of the songwriting process itself.

Y'know, I have to say, lyrically, this record is appropriate for the time. I am pleased by my lyrics on the record. Lyrics are hard. They just are. You've got to come up with something that means something but is not dead obvious. You're trying to make something that is evocative of a certain emotion without it being a nursery rhyme or too obvious.

It's hard to explain but the lyrics on this record are meaningful to me. I am happy with the singing and I am happy with the lyrics on it, and it is interesting to me that it is coming out at the time that it is because it was the right time to put this record out.

IK Multimedia Syntronik 2 MAX

RRP: $TBC

MAXING OUT ITS VINTAGE PLUGIN PACKAGE, IK MULTIMEDIA ADDS NEW SYNTHS, EFFECTS AND SOME TASTY NEW GUIS TO ITS ALREADY GENEROUS SOFTWARE SYNTH.

Have you ever played that game where you build a shopping list of vintage synth classics? Scour the auction sites for the machines you couldn't afford when you were a teenager, and you'll likely find that it's an even worse financial prospect now! All is not lost though, as we dive headlong into the realm of nostalgia, thanks to IK Multimedia.

Syntronik 2 is a welcome update, building upon the reliable Mk 1 offering from IK. We're reviewing the full suite, which is described as Syntronik 2 MAX. This offers a full-sized compendium of 33 software instruments, placed at the top of the package tree. If that feels a little overblown for your requirements, the regular-sized version offers 22 synth instruments, while the entry-level SE version includes 11 synth instruments.

Syntronik 2 operates within the plugin domain; upon loading for the first time, one of the first games to play is 'spot the synth'. There are some cryptic names in play, all of which relate to some form of classic from yesteryear. Some very distinguished, diverse and popular models have been ported from Syntronik 1. These include the Minimoog Model D, Prophet-5, Jupiter 8, Juno 60, Oberheim OB-X/Xa and even PPG Wave 2.3.

Syntronik's sound engine is sample-based, meaning that the initial sounds you hear are incredibly faithful, being derived from the original machines. Arguably, this means that you don't get the subtlety of analogue detuning, but IK has devised a cunning solution for weaving this back into the sound. Its DRIFT technology promotes a degree of detuning, to mimic the originals, but it actually goes far further, varying phase and colour, alongside the pitch element. It's a potent combo, for both faithful sounds and analogue behaviour, and it's very effective.

As we delve into the browser, navigation requires a little getting used to. On the one hand, sounds are nicely organised, with a choice of model and timbre categorisation, but you have to deselect your choice, before choosing again. Once you have a sound at your disposal, the sonic parade is impressive.

We begin our vintage sojourn with the J-60, based on the vintage Juno-60, and a machine we know well; like a sonic facsimile, it's undeniably Juno, but we really enjoyed some of the extensions which IK has applied. Apart from a user interface that immediately summons the spirit of 80s Roland, it's the application of numerous additional features, never previously available on the Juno, which takes this classic to a new realm. Seven different filter types can be modulated by a dedicated envelope and five different LFO shapes.

The filters are available universally, throughout the entire suite, and by way of helpful clues, the filters are often prefixed by a letter; M-type relates to a Moog-style ladder filter, C-type replicates the Curtis chips found in Prophets and OB-Xa synths, with further filter facsimiles from Roland and the Oberheim SEM. Some of the filters also offer a variable state which can include high, band and notch-pass filtering, alongside the prerequisite low pass. We also really loved the formant filter, providing vocalise as a stylish alternative to the original low-pass default.

NEW SOUNDS ABOUND

One of the many highlights of this updated suite would be the addition of 11 new synth models. With so many of the classics already in situ, there are some interesting alternatives, ranging from the Octave Cat and Synergy ii+ to the Moog Source, OSCar and Waldorf Microwave. These could probably justify the price tag alone, but with the existing 22 synths, Syntronik 2 feels very complete.

We're not rich enough to be able to compare all of the synths to the originals in sonic terms, but you get some way to being able to do so when you throw open the versatile architecture, with the ability to mix and swap filters. What is assured is the earthiness and realism in the sound; the depth in the basses and lower mids is substantial across the board. Some classics didn't always perform so well in the lower echelons, but the flexible programming architecture allows any gripes to be altered efficiently. It just depends on what you want for your mix, and in this, Syntronik plays a blinder.

STACK ATTACK

Editing can be undertaken within the environment of a standardised universal view, which provides an efficient way of getting at all of the editable content. It also opens the modulation matrix, which provides deep complexity for programming mutations. But for our money, we love the visual treat of the original machines in GUI form as IK has spent quite a bit of time recreating lovely eye candy.

If the raw individual patches and programming options aren't enough for you, there's always the layering mode, where up to four synth patches may be stacked, either as a full multi-patch in itself or with capacity for simple key-zoning. Add in 71 effects and processing elements, and a programmable arpeggiator and Syntronik 2 adds up to a sizeable tome of synth goodness.

VINTAGE FINALITY

There's an awful lot that we like about this suite; the sheer wealth of hearty sampled vintage-ness, the capacity to make the samples sound analogue, and then there's the beautifully designed GUIs. The GUIs are large in scale and very desirable as a result, with more elaborate programming capacity from within the universal editing display. You get the feel of the originals, without the component failure and excessive price tag, alongside a bewildering choice of popular stalwarts and unique oddities. It's an abundant collection with plenty for musicians and producers, from all walks of genre.

VERDICT

A worthy compendium of classic synths that offers great samples alongside nicely crafted filtering options and stylish GUI.

PROS

- Comprehensive suite of classics.
- Full bodied sonic architecture, derived from samples.
- Mix-and-match filter employment.
- Layering capability is impressive.

CONS

- Preset selection takes time.
- Not always entirely faithful.

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EarthQuaker Devices Hizumitas Fuzz Sustainer

BORIS! GUITARIST **WATA** CRAFTED A TRULY ONE-OF-A-KIND TONE, AND HERE, EQD GO TO STUNNING LENGTHS TO RECREATE IT. REVIEW BY **ART THOMPSON**.

RRP: $299

A vintage Japanese Elk BM Sustainar pedal-has been the source of the bombastic tone that guitarist Wata gets in the experi-metal band, Boris!, and the new Hizumitas pedal is the result of EarthQuaker's efforts to re-create it.

The story goes that after testing different versions of the Elk BM and finding – no surprise – that they all sounded different, EarthQuaker's designers realised the only way to reproduce the tones that Wata wields was to get their hands on her actual pedal. Amazingly, she sent it to them to evaluate, and they discovered that it indeed possessed a special circuit that produced heavy saturation and had a gritty edge and massive bottom. Yet it also had a clear and dynamic presentation, with plenty of mids and top-end bite.

Our review model has a silvery metal enclosure emblazoned with purple jackalopes and lightning bolts, like a coat of arms. The compact pedal has sustain, tone and volume controls, top-mounted jacks and a bypass foot switch that is relay controlled and requires nine volts DC to operate. The circuitry is laid out on a glass-epoxy PCB, and it's nice that you can see the components when the bottom plate is removed. However, battery power is not an option with this pedal, nor is an adapter provided.

Plugged into a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a '66 Vibro-Champ for studio playing – and pummelled with a Epiphone Lazarus Les Paul and a Reverend Gristlemaster T-style guitar – the Hizumitas churned out gritty distortion tones, with gobs of singing sustain available via the knob marked "S". The tone control delivers everything from huge low end when turned clockwise to skinnier textures when spun the opposite direction.

Setting the knob around two o' clock produced a killer tone with rich midrange color and a clear, articulate top end. Small control adjustments let you home in on slim single-coils or meaty humbuckers, and the pedal is dynamically responsive and cleans up quite well when you lighten up on the attack and/or turn down the guitar volume. It also has a lot of output so you can easily overdrive amps or pedals and get that combination of juice from the Hizumitas and whatever it's driving into.

▶ VERDICT

A superb grind machine that walks the line between distortion and fuzz, the Hizumitas is a Godzilla for heavy styles, although it can be deployed for pretty much anything where beefy, dynamic crunch is the order. Well done!

▶ PROS

- Delivers crushing grind and massive low end.

▶ CONS

- No provision for battery power.

▶ CONTACT

YAMAHA AUSTRALIA
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Web: au.yamaha.com

Boss SY-200 Synthesizer

THE EASIEST EVER GATEWAY TO EXPLORING SYNTH SOUNDS. REVIEW BY **PAUL RIARIO**.

RRP: $599

One of the biggest drawbacks keeping many guitarists from using synthesisers was the commitment required. In the past, guitar synthesiser systems required dedicated controllers or special pickup systems, and the sound modules were usually housed in bulky floor controllers or rack mount units. This was fine for players who were fully dedicated to making a guitar synth their main instrument, but for guitarists who just wanted a couple cool synth sounds for occasional leads or some lush pads for a few rhythm parts it was a bit much.

The Boss SY-200 Synthesizer pedal provides a compact, easy-to-use alternative that's perfect for everyone from guitarists who to explore a handful of synth sounds and textures to full-blown guitar synth enthusiasts. Housed in a unit that's only slightly larger than a standard Boss compact pedal and offering true plug-and-play performance (no special pickups or controllers are needed), the SY-200 is the easiest way for guitarists to explore the vast universe of synthesiser sounds.

The SY-200 offers 171 sounds arranged in a dozen groups – Lead, Pad, String, Bell, Organ, Bass, Dual, Sweep, Noise, SFX, SEQ and Arpeggio. Individual sounds are accessed via a rotary switch and the Variation knob, and they are easily modified via three multi-function parameter knobs. Users can save customised sounds to 128 internal memory locations.

The top panel also includes individual level controls for the direct guitar signal and effect (synth), a Menu button for accessing on/off, control and expression pedal functions and send/return, system, MIDI, MIDI PC map and factory reset functions, an Exit button for quickly returning to performance mode and a rotary Memory knob for scrolling through presets.

All performance and editing settings are easy to see thanks to a large, brightly lit LCD display. A pair of footswitches provide on/of and assignable memory/control 1 and hold functions. Input, output, send, return and controller quarter-inch jacks are mounted on the rear panel, and eighth-inch MIDI In and Out and a mini USB jack are located on the left side. The pedal is powered by three AA batteries or an optional Boss PSA-S adapter.

The Boss SY-200 provides guitarists with the easiest gateway to exploring synth sounds ever. Just plug the unit between your guitar and amp like an ordinary effects pedal and you're instantly ready to go – no level or sensitivity tweaking or other adjustments are required.

The synth sounds track flawlessly without latency, whether playing single-note lines or chords (thanks to the SY-200's polyphonic capabilities), but note that it's best to play notes as cleanly as possible and avoid techniques like string scrapes and artificial harmonics that may not track well. Also, as typical for any guitar synth, players may need to adjust their playing technique for certain sounds, such as patches with slow attack envelopes.

The 171 sounds cover an excellent variety of synth tones and textures. While the SY-200 may not be quite as versatile as a dedicated synthesiser and lacks some of the most fashionable EDM sounds, it still works particularly well for adding new dimensions to solos, rhythm parts and chord pads in a full band context.

I particularly loved blending several of the Lead sounds with the regular guitar signal and a distortion pedal patched to the send/return jacks to play massive-sounding solos. Most of the patches sound great when amplified through a regular guitar amp dialled to a clean setting or even mild overdrive, but the SY-200 sounds best when connected to a full-range sound system. An ABY pedal is worth consideration for players who want to get the best of both worlds.

▶ VERDICT

The Boss SY-200 Synthesizer offers guitarists the easiest and most affordable gateway to the wonderful world of guitar synthesis by providing true plug-and-play performance in a compact pedal unit that delivers 171 awesome synth sounds.

▶ PROS

- 171 sounds cover an excellent variety of synth tones and textures.
- All performance and editing settings are easy to see.

▶ CONS

- Not quite as versatile as a dedicated synthesiser.

▶ CONTACT

ROLAND AUSTRALIA
Ph: (02) 9982 8266
Web: roland.com/au

Tone City Audio Blues Man

RRP: $109

TONE CITY'S TAKE ON EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE '60S UK BLUES AMP PACKS A DECEPTIVELY BIG TONE INTO A TEENY LITTLE BOX. REVIEW BY **PETER HODGSON**.

The story of Tone City Audio begins with one teenager's frustration with the cost of pedals. J.Wong was like any other kid rocking out in their bedroom dreaming of better gear than they had. So while studying Business Automation Systems at university in China, he set aside time to read books and articles English about electronics, audio, and how they intersect. He ended up taking six months longer to finish his major because he went so deep down the pedal rabbit-hole, but it meant he could design and build pedals, the first of which was his own version of that famous green overdrive.

J.Wong designed pedals for another company at first, but while players loved the tones, they were less enthusiastic about the build quality. So he decided to strike out on his own with Tone City Audio, with a dedicated production facility and a full range micro, compact and double pedals hand-wired with NOS components, BBD chips, silicon transistor styled circuits, classic JFETs, OTA and analogue/digital hybrid technology.

And that brings us to the Blues Man pedal. The Blues Man is very 'Tone City Audio'. Every feature has a purpose, and anything that gets in the way of what the player needs is either shrunk or omitted. It's best described as an overdrive pedal, but that doesn't really tell the whole story because you can use it as your main dirty sound, a beautiful edgy clean sound, a boost, a preamp... it's effectively voiced like a particular UK-made combo amplifier from the '60s, one that has appeared on classic blues recordings and is also quite adept at crunchy hard rock, alternative and indie tones. You can probably figure out which blues amp without breaking your brain.

But let's backtrack and look at the features. First up, this is a micro-sized pedal, a wee little baby. Micro-sized pedals really seemed to kick off about 15 years ago and grew to be a big part of how we play today. While stomp boxes had been marketed with words like 'compact' since the late '70s, the new super-slim form factor became ubiquitous and it wasn't just the space-saving benefits (although you can get away with a much smaller pedal board with a handful of these little baby stompers). It was also the fact that with each pedal taking up less space, you could fit more of them on your pedalboard, so you could choose to either have a simple, streamlined pedalboard, or a huge, utterly stacked one. We're guitar players. We like excess.

Most Tone City Audio micro pedals have one large control knob which doubles as the effect-on status LED, plus a few other smaller controls towards the top of the unit. In this case the larger control is the Gain knob, while the others are Volume and Tone. The input and output jacks are side-mounted and staggered so you can cram more of 'em onto your pedalboard, and the unit is powered by a 9-volt power supply only. A battery would be too big for the small form-factor, and also I wonder if this design decision allows J.Wong to have more control over the consistency of sound, knowing that players won't be running his pedals on a depleted battery and therefore not representing the pedals in their best light. It's a very robust pedal, as you would expect when part of the company's reason for existing is to emphasise the 'high-quality' part.

Alrighty, let's plug it in. Straight up you'll notice that the Blues Man is a very responsive pedal. If you get the chance to try one, start on the lowest gain setting to hear its slightly compressed, midrange-heavy voicing without extra grit. It'll take a boring clean tone and punch it up with a crisp attack, nice sustain and a bit of a 'honk' that lets you really hold your ground in a mix.

Increase the Gain control a little and you'll get more bite and bloom for a bit of that Dumble-esque feel (although it's not aiming to be a Dumble pedal), and it's here that you really start to feel the enhanced harmonic content when you pick a note a bit harder. Dig into a double-stop for a gritty, sassy attitude, or grab a high note and bend the bejabbers out of it and hear it open up as it sustains. Really fun stuff.

At the highest gain ranges, the Blues Man becomes a dirty, whisky-soaked adventure, maybe on a motorbike, definitely in a leather jacket. It manages to hold onto its identity even when totally saturated (like me on a whisky-soaked adventure of my own).

The experience is different depending on what kind of pickups you use. With my American Vintage Reissue '62 Stratocaster it sounds moody, smoky, and fatter than you might expect from the typical Strat. Conversely, with my Les Paul Traditional with Seymour Duncan JB and Jazz pickups, the Blues Man brings out more of the guitar's subtleties (until you hit the higher ranges of the gain control and we get to that great saturation).

▶ VERDICT

It'll be particularly favoured by players who use a clean amp sound and who get all of their gain from pedals, and it'll add dimension and richness to your overdriven amp sounds too, but it almost seems a shame to bury its nuances in more gain on top of

▶ PROS

- Packed with features…
- …And every feature has a purpose.

▶ CONS

- None.

▶ CONTACT

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Web: egm.net.au

Tula Microphone

TULA MICROPHONE'S EPONYMOUS DEBUT PRODUCT LOOKS RETRO-FUTURISTIC, BUT ITS INTERNALS ARE ANYTHING BUT RETRO.

RRP: $375

REVIEW BY **PETER HODGSON**.

You know how sometimes a piece of gear comes along that looks simple on the surface but the closer you look the more you realise it has a lot going on? That's the Tula mic. It's a multi-purpose USB mic made for people like us, who might need one mic for podcasting, music-demoing and work-from-home purposes depending on what we're doing that day. It's also super-cute from a design perspective, with intuitive features that appear to have come out of the semiotics playbook: you can pretty much figure this little thing out without the manual, because you can learn a lot from just picking it up.

The Tula isn't just a USB mic though: it's also a mobile recorder with 8 gigs of internal memory and up to 12 hours of recording time in .wav format. So you can podcast in the field, record a riff wherever the moment strikes you, or even record a pretty nice document of a rehearsal when you realise the mics built into your phone don't quite cut it.

The company Tula Microphones only makes this one product at the moment and you can tell that they've thrown everything they've got at it, and you would expect no less from the team behind the Soyuz Microphones. It's designed with Burr Brown op amps and dedicated cardioid and omni capsules, with 16-bit, 48kHz sound. If you're not up on your mic types, cardioid (unidirectional) is sensitive to the sound coming from directly in front, with almost no sound coming from directly behind, and reduced sound from the sides.

You'll want to use this mode to really focus on things like vocals, acoustic guitar, etc. The omnidirectional mic pattern is more like a circle extending all the way around the mic, picking up sound from all directions. This is the one you would choose if you were trying to pick up a conversation around a table, or to capture some room-sound for your instrument recording.

Tula's firmware engineer collaborated with Klevgrand to create an embedded version of their Brusfri noise reduction algorithm which is capable of stripping away some of the audio mung that can be picked up in busy environments. The system recognises the target audio and strips out the rest (as they point out in the manual, it won't remove your screaming kids, but it will take normal-sounding room and make it sound like a well-treated recording studio).

Physically, it's a very high-quality unit that will surely stand up to all sorts of in-situ shenanigans. Available in Cream, Black, Red and Sea Foam, it's an attractive little device that looks like a handheld shaver from the 1950s as reinterpreted on Futurama. It has an inbuilt kickstand (but can also be mounted on a mic stand) and, and each side of the unit features a row of illuminated controls which are, on one side (deep breath).; Gain Up, Gain Down, Skip Forward, Skip Back, Mite Microphone, Noise Reduction and omni/cardioid Mic Select.

On the other side you'll find a 3.5mm input/output that you can use for headphones or as an input for a lav mic; Volume Up, Volume Down, Record/Pause, Stop, Play/Pause and On/Off. There are LEDs on the front to serve as Record Indicator and Gain Meter, while on the back you'll find a battery level indicator, a Hard Reset button (accessed in the same way you'd open the SIM tray on an iPhone) and the USB-C port. Every surface serves a function, and does so in a visually attractive way that serves the whole of the design. It's even entirely snapped and screwed together for easy repair and EOL recycling.

Tula offers an incredibly musical, detailed, rich sound for such a small unit. I used it to record some nylon-string classical guitar and it captured all the mids and finger-attack that I was hoping to hear on the playback. It also sounded great for some mandolin tracks I was messing around with, and I experimented with both cardioid and omni modes to see what worked best, with omni bringing more resonance and depth to the tone but cardioid making it easier to place into a mix.

I also had a bit of fun recording passes of omni and cardioid for different overdubs of the same acoustic guitar part, capturing the detail and attack on one pass and the body and room echo on the other. And as transparent as this mic is, it's stuff like this that makes it a creative tool as much as a documenting one.

Special mention must go to the noise reduction, which stripped out the background whooshes and rumbles that I've become used to from my recording environment, from fans and computers and speaker hiss and all that other horrid stuff you have to deal with when you don't have a pro studio at your disposal. It's especially effective on the cardioid mic where it can provide hyper focus for your vocals or acoustic instruments.

And yes, you can definitely use it on guitar cabinets, although you'll probably find that its frequency profile is quite different to the classic SM57 we all use. The recording feature feels like more of a great added bonus, unless you're a podcaster, or perhaps an acoustic performer who wants to document a show with no fuss, but its utility depends entirely on what the end user plans to do with it.

VERDICT

This is a really gorgeous piece of kit, the kind of thing that's worthy of keeping out on display when you're not using it (although a hardy little softcase is also available to keep it extra safe when you need to chuck it in a pocket, backpack or gig bag). But it's clear that as much work has gone into the stuff you can't see as the stuff you can.

PROS

- Incredibly musical, detailed, rich sound.
- Fantastic price.

CONS

- Functionality will vary

CONTACT

STUDIO CONNECTIONS
Ph: (03) 9416 8097
Web: studioconnections.com.au

RRP: $2,595

Markbass Mini CMD 151P

HIGH OUTPUT, SMALL CAB, 15-INCH DRIVE *AND* A BIG SOUND?

REVIEW BY **STEVE HENDERSON**.

Markbass seem to have a gift: think of any combination of amp features that can't be done, and they'll figure out a way of doing it. It's not like we need another compact bass combo (they always sound box-y and tonally confined, anyway), but this Mini is too interesting to ignore. It's small (just 18 inches tall), light (18 kilograms), and features a full tone set and then some. Indeed, the tonal range of these controls is quite astounding and, yet, it's easy to dial in a great sound.

The Mini CMD 151P, like all the Markbass gear, has a pretty serious appearance, but with just a hint of frivolity on the control panel with a touch of yellow. And then there's that big yellow cone looking at you. That's a 400-watt, eight-ohm 15-inch speaker that is practically indestructible. It handles every bit of the power of internal power amp and it's surprising how deep and rich this single 15, in its little box, really is. I wouldn't have thought it possible to get the low E of the P Bass to have that distinctive thud but here it is with plenty of clean headroom to spare. That low note, 41 hertz for those who are interested, is always a problem with combos but the Mini punches it out with a rounded attack, then it quickly blooms into a harmonically-rich sustain.

The Mini has an active four-band tone set, plus their magical (mythical?) VLE and VPF circuits. Bass, low and high midrange, and treble are pretty straight forward. The other two is where the mystery begins. Think of the VLE (Vintage Loudspeaker Emulator) as the olde school knob – if you're after a Bassman or Ampeg tone, this is where you go. The VPF (Variable Preshape Filter) is sort of a mid shift – think of the "classic V" on a graphic EQ: bass and treble boosted, mids scooped. The basses used for this review are a maple-board P Bass with EMG PJs, a fretted StingRay, a fretless StingRay, and an Ashbury Bass – yeah, that funky little number with the silicon strings. Bouncing between them usually means radical tone set resets. Playing with the VLE and VPF controls was just too much fun.

The P Bass pickup sounded really old-school with the VLE at about 12 o'clock; the StingRay pickup at about two o'clock; and dial it off for a modern snap. The J Bass pickup sounded more woody as the VPF was increased and, for funky, this is a killer sound. The StingRay, too, loves the VPF but this pickup sounds funky with just a touch. The fretless StingRay takes on a more "upright" vibe under the spell of the VPF, with that lovely organic double bass feel when sliding between scale tones. The Ashbury is simply a hoot to play with the VLE and the VPF at about two o'clock – loads of jazzy double bass atmosphere; loads of acoustic flavours.

Just for fun, I sat the Mini on top of a Hartke 410, in parallel with the internal speaker. The amp now produced 500 real watts and the lows opened up even more. Actually, it sounded like a whole lot more that 500 watts and I'm not sure if I preferred this sound over just the combo. It certainly had more spread but the Mini has such broad coverage by itself that it seems like a whole lot of lugging for not much return. If I really needed more oomph, I'd probably choose a Markbass Marcus Miller 102 Cab: eight ohms with plenty of headroom and an easy lug.

The Mini doesn't have to be super-clean. You can dial in some grunt and growl with the Pre and Master knobs. The value of the VLE circuit is even more obvious when a bit of grind is present – it takes the edge off the crunch. The Mini also has a variable DI knob feeding an XLR, an effects loop (jacks), and a handy tuner output jack. The loop is great for bass chorus and an EQ pedal, if you need to switch in an extra tone circuit from time to time. The effects send can also be used as an output to feed another DI or straight into another power amp. Hook up the send to the return of another Mini and you'll have two amps controlled from the first amp's knobs. Too much? Yeah…probably too much!

Instead of going after the amateur or serious enthusiast market, where most compacts are aimed, they've focused on the pro who wants all the goods in a small, easy-to-lug, practically-indestructible package. The Mini is a serious amp but it could be easily overlooked due to its diminutive presentation. It's surprisingly loud, surprisingly tuneful, and surprisingly compact. Best of all, it's incredibly versatile.

▶ VERDICT

The folks at Markbass seem to understand what the market needs before the market even knows it, and the Mini is clear proof of that. Whatever style you're into, the Mini is all over it.

▶ PROS

- Great tone and volume.
- Super build quality.
- Simple and logical to operate.
- Very portable.

▶ CONS

- None.

▶ CONTACT

CMC MUSIC
Ph: (02) 9905 2511
Web: cmcmusic.com.au

Cort Tube Craft CMV15 1x12 Combo

CORT IS BECOMING QUITE WELL KNOWN FOR ITS OWN-BRAND GUITARS, AS WELL AS THOSE IT MAKES FOR OTHER BRANDS, SUCH AS PRS' SE LINE. BUT A VALVE AMP? LET'S TAKE A LOOK…

REVIEW BY **NICK GUPPY**.

RRP: TBC

Pioneered by the late Jack Westheimer back in the heady days of the early 1960s, the Cort brand is familiar to many guitar players around the world. However, the scale of this Korean company's operation may be less well understood. From its factories in Indonesia and China, Cort annually ships around a million guitars worldwide and almost a third of a million guitar amplifiers. Many of these are OEM products built for other well-known brands, although, for some time, Cort has produced instruments under its own name as well. There's now a Cort all-valve amplifier to add to this manufacturing giant's catalogue: the new Tube Craft CMV15, designed in collaboration with Korean boutique effects master Moollon.

The Tube Craft CMV15 is a handsome-looking compact 1x12 combo, echoing the 'less is more' ethos of many high-end boutique builders. The birch-ply cabinet is neatly covered in heavy-duty black vinyl with black metal corners and a matching grille cloth with gold piping. A smart gold Cort badge sits over the cloth and you'll spot a discreet Moollon logo in the bottom-right corner. The none-more-black colour scheme is broken up by a trio of ivory vinyl 'go faster' stripes on the top panel inlaid with black piping, adding a touch of boutique class, although the equally black control panel is a bit difficult to read and we'd have preferred a contrasting colour or graphics to make the controls stand out a little more.

The CMV15's electronics live inside a compact aluminium chassis, which is a great choice for valve guitar amps; it's much lighter than steel, non-ferrous so it doesn't interfere with transformer magnetic fields, and a very good conductor of heat. The internal layout is an interesting mix, with one main PCB in the centre of the chassis for the preamp and power supply components, and smaller PCB strips for the front panel controls and rea -panel sockets.

On the main board, the components are all arranged parallel to each other as they would be on an old-school turret-wired assembly – like that found in vintage Vox AC15s, for example. Meanwhile, the valve bases are mounted directly on the chassis and hand-wired into the rest of the circuit. This approach completely isolates the circuit boards from thermal and physical stress, using the aluminium chassis as a heatsink to help keep things cool, which greatly improves the amp's longterm reliability prospects.

The control panel won't demand a long time with the manual. It has a pair of high- and low-gain input jacks feeding black chickenhead knobs for Gain, Bass, Middle, Treble and a master volume. On the rear panel, there's a selection of fixed impedance output jacks and a pair of send/return jacks for the CMV15's series effects loop. Overall, the Cort CMV15 is a good-looking, straightforward combo that's compact and not too heavy to cart around. It also has robust build quality and hand-wired valve sockets, making it a great longterm bet.

We checked out Cort's Tube Craft CMV15 with our regular PAF-equipped Les Paul and an old Strat loaded with Seymour Duncan Alnico Pro II single coils. The sounds we hear are more Brit influenced than American, with a prominent midrange, tight bass and highs that can be pushed into an aggressive bite when needed. On our sample there's a slight background hum, which would need a little attention from a noise gate for recording. However, this isn't uncommon with cathode-biased output stages and is usually cured by swapping to a different pair of output valves. For live use, however, the background noise is unnoticeable.

There's plenty of volume available from the custom Moollon G12-30M loudspeaker, which stays crisp and responsive as the master volume is turned up, providing a wide range of different overdrive tones depending how you balance the gain and master volume. The traditional passive EQ tone controls interact in a nice predictable fashion, making it easy to dial in the amp.

Some amplifiers sound equally great with single coils and humbuckers, others tend to favour one or the other pickup types. Our impression is that the CMV15 definitely favours the thicker midrange of a decent 'bucker. Our Strat (which doesn't have high-output pickups) certainly sounded okay, but it worked much better with a little help from an overdrive pedal. When we were using our Les Paul, we found some great tones with the gain and master volume both around halfway up, where the preamp overdrive and output stage clip began to work together nicely for dynamic, touch-sensitive leads that clean up well as you pick with a lighter touch or back off the guitar's volume control.

In common with many boutique designs, the CMV15's simple circuit has a clarity and transparency that lets the guitar breathe, making it ideal for many different genres, although it really excels at late-'60s and early '70s blues and classic rock, with plenty of volume and headroom for live gigs and a great loudspeaker that seems to enjoy being driven hard. With the gain set low and the master volume high, the CMV15's clarity makes it an excellent pedalboard amp as well, whether or not you choose to use the series effects loop.

Hand-wired amps are increasingly expensive things to buy these days, and while the Tube Craft CMV15 uses a few PCBs, the valve sockets are neatly hand-wired into an aluminium chassis here, and the component layout is based on turret board designs, giving this amp the kind of sonic integrity, build quality and reliability more often seen on products costing up to twice the price. We also really like its British classic rock vibe, not to mention the cool racing stripes on the neatly covered cabinet.

▶ VERDICT

The CMV15 is a great little combo that's aimed at valve enthusiasts of all levels. Definitely one worth checking out.

▶ PROS

- A stylish combo that's built to last.
- Excellent value for money.
- Great-sounding speaker.

▶ CONS

- The background noise on this sample is slightly too high for home practice and serious recording.
- The front-panel control markings are a little difficult to read.

▶ CONTACT

DYNAMIC MUSIC

Ph: (02) 9939 1299

Web: dynamicmusic.com.au

EVH Iconic 5150 Head

A SHOCKINGLY AFFORDABLE HEAD THAT DISTILLS SOME OF THE FINEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FEW DECADES OF THE AMP MARKET. REVIEW BY **ALEX WILSON**.

RRP: $1,799

The online launch of the EVH 5150 Iconic was, to put it nicely, mixed. When the promotional vid announcing the product went online in mid-December '21, many shredders in the comment section were left agog. Was this amateurish tone, managing to be muddy and fizzy at the same time, really coming from a head emblazoned with the names of both the iconic Peavey amp and one of the great all-time virtuosos?

They say that any publicity is good publicity, right? And in any case, the fear has since subsided, as cooler heads and happy customers have begun to pitch in their two cents in the months following. Chalk it up to a regrettably bad sound mix on the video, the internet's need for clickbait, and the inexplicable tendency of online guitarists to get terribly angry about a piece of gear before they even get a chance to play it.

The no-BS take is as follows: the 5150 Iconic is a good, even great, amp. Especially for the price. It is not really a mere discount version of the original Peavey classic. More accurately it's a reimagining that riffs on the original design by trimming gear-nerd fat, modernising the tone and doubling-down on useful features. Approach it with that mindset and you'll find that it not only sounds excellent, but has plenty else to recommend it.

What we're dealing with here is an 80-watt amp with two channels and a shared low/mid/high EQ. Each channel has its own gain control, as well as the customary 5150-ish EQ on the power amp – Resonance and Presence. There are also front-panel switches that allow you to add extra gain to each channel, called Overdrive and Burn respectively. The 5150 Iconic cranks out 80 watts, with two 12AX7s in the preamp, four 6L6s in the power stage and solid state rectification. Next to the Power and Standby switches is a Power Level switch. This allows the amp to run at 25 percent power for people who really want to chase that Variac brown sound.

Beyond the basic signal chain, this amp is packed with features and I will probably struggle to list them all. In the first instance, it onboards into the design what many high-gain players would use pedals for. There's a noise gate, adjustable by a knob on the front panel, that applies to the high-gain channel. It's easy to use and works fine. There's a spring reverb, also adjustable from the front panel, that sounds nice and clean. Finally, there's a Boost knob sitting next to the foot-switchable channel selector. This allows the player to add extra decibels without the need for a tubescreamer. All well-considered, genuinely useful sonic features that increase the musicality and gigability of this head.

The fun continues on the back panel. You have dual speaker outputs with four, eight and 16 ohm switchable impedance. There's a latency-free cab-simmed XLR output that is perfect for situations where you want to send such a signal to FOH or monitors. For silent recording, however, you'd probably want to hit the switch that disables the power amp and plug into the Preamp Out jack, adding your impulse response later.

Besides the excellent feature set, the 5150 Iconic can offer the player loads of gain. This isn't hyperbole. Some of the nastiest (in a good way) riff tones this reviewer has conjured up came from this amp's Ch 2 with the Burn switch on. For most players, even of heavy music, the 5150 Iconic cranked to the max is way more distortion than they'll ever need, but if they are anything like me they'll be strangely comforted by knowing it can get that gnarly if the need arises.

Does the gain sound resemble either the original Peavey 5150 or EVH's more expensive 5150III? Depending on how finicky you wanna get, the answer lies somewhere between mostly and sort of. The non-EQ character of the distortion, the way it breaks up, for lack of a better phrase, sounds pretty damn similar to my ears. Classic 5150s and 6505s are prized for their ability to chug with both gainy aggression and dynamic low-end. This, for example, feels very right on the Iconic.

What is different is an EQ curve and knob response that trades some low-mid heft from the older amps for high-mid bite. This is no bad thing inherently. In fact it likely gets the newer 5150 Iconic more in the ballpark of where a recording or live engineer would want a rock or metal tone to be EQ-wise. It all depends on your perspective and subjective tastes as to whether you prefer this new approach but safe to say that the Iconic continues EVH's reputation for excellent and useable high-gain sounds.

The clean channel is often neglected in discussions about hi-gain amps, but I wanted to mention that the one on offer here is a bit of a low-key weapon. It can be super-duper clean and chimey, through to thick and crunchy, right up to knocking on the door of metal tone. Both channels are voiced beautifully in respect of each other. Particularly considering that all EQ on the front-panel is shared between both channels, it was gratifying how seamless and balanced the amp's response felt when switching channels.

I started playing guitar, focusing on rock and metal, in the late '90s and early '00s. These were dark days for affordable high-gain amps, people! Your options were to spend a fortune on some incredibly heavy all-tube beast (as if) or cheap out and buy some affordable but awful solid-state option with built-in FX and distortion that just sounded plain terrible. On top of that neither had much ability to switch easily from performing in the home to on the stage.

This is some real talk to try and contextualise the griping and bellyaching that greeted this fine amp when it hit the streets last year. We teenage millennials would have killed for an amp that sounds this good, with this much flexibility coming in at under $2,000! Indeed, the EVH 5150 Iconic distills some of the finest developments in the amp market over the past few decades into something that really delivers bang for buck.

▶ VERDICT

This would make a great first amp for any player who is starting to get serious about performance and tone, packing maximum tone and features into a really well-considered package. If you live to riff then check it out.

▶ PROS

- Price.
- Functionality.
- Gigability.

▶ CONS

- Doesn't quite stack up to the original Peavey 5150 or EVH's more expensive 5150III.

▶ CONTACT

FENDER
Ph: (02) 8198 1300
Web: fender.com

Jackson Pro Series Monarkh SCP

RRP: $2,349

A THIN-BODIED SINGLE-CUT WITH AN EYE-CATCHING FINISH AND PUNISHING TONES. REVIEW BY **SIMON ARBLASTER**.

For a company synonymous with the Rhoads, Kelly, Dinky, et al – especially when equipped with floating trems we might add – the Jackson Monarkh always feels like a more subdued breath of fresh air, in a sea of spikiness. Here we have the Pro Series Monarkh SCP, another shred-ready, metal machine that ditches that none-more-black look for a transparent purple burl finish.

Jackson's take on the trusty old LP differs from most manufacturers' efforts at the Gibson classic, most notably at the cutaway. It is much smaller than most single-cutaway appendages out there, presumably to avoid snagging on over-exuberant belt buckles and cod-pieces. Regardless, we certainly like it. The more compact body is further realised around the rear where there is much sculpting to an already svelt body – this thing is thin!

The beautiful purple look is offset with black hardware and a three-ply w/b/w binding and combined with Jackson's 34x3 AT-1 headstock, it might not be as spiky as some of its stablemates, this particular Monarkh still very much has metal on its mind.

Rounding off the spec sheet is the classic pairing of Seymour Duncan's mighty JB SH-4 pickup in the bridge and the trusty '59 SH-1N in the neck. Both pickups complement each other very well for versatile heaviness with tons of clarity. Okay, so they are not the most exotic of pickup choices, but there is a sense of dependability with this combo. This is mirrored in the no-nonsense controls of the three-way pickup switch, individual volume and overall tone pots. There's enough fine-tune adjustment of tone here without getting too over-complicated.

Overall, the Pro Series Monarkh SCP is solidly built and arrived set up just so, further reinforcing the dependability of this guitar. Perhaps the crowning glory of this particular model is the neck. It's a set-neck with graphite reinforcement, which at this price point we expect to see and with a compound radius of 12-to-16 inches feels nice and flat. The feel though is exemplified by the hand-oiled finish and combined with the satin finish lets you effortlessly glide through any metal opus with ease.

Generally, Jackson's burl finishes are just plain gorgeous and the Pro Series Monarkh SCP is no exception which we have to say is all down to the colour choice. It's more plum, rather than an all-out in-your-face purple and quite frankly we can't keep our eyes off it. So if you're looking for a sonically dependable rhythm machine that looks utterly stunning, this is it.

▶ VERDICT

Sonically dependable with a stunning finish, the Pro Series Monarkh SCP is a state-of-the-art single-cut that further enhances Jackson's rep as the high-performance metal guitar brand.

▶ PROS

- Playable in every sense of the word.
- The finish is really something.
- Classic Seymour Duncan humbucker pairing.

▶ CONS

- No left-handed models.
  Price does not include a case.

▶ CONTACT

FENDER
Ph: (02) 8198 1300
Web: fender.com

ProCo Lil' Rat

RRP: $209

GET YOUR TEETH INTO SOME CLASSIC DISTORTION: NOW IN A SMALLER PACKAGE. REVIEW BY **STUART WILLIAMS**.

From Gilmour to Grohl, the Pro Co Rat has earned its place as a bona fide classic distortion pedal since it was first released in 1978. It's been through many guises, too, including the RAT 2, You Dirty Rat and Vintage Big Box Rat reissue and many more. But now everyone's favourite rodent-based dirt box has been given the miniaturisation treatment resulting in a ratlet measuring just five centimetres wide by eight front to back and five high.

Now, we know that people get sniffy about reissues and clones of classic pedals, so it's worth pointing out that Pro Co says the Lil' Rat uses identical components to our – fairly ancient itself – Rat 2. But there are a few changes. Most notably the controls have been shrunken, and while it doesn't run off a battery like its big brother, the Lil' Rat has thankfully had a power jack upgrade to a standard diameter barrel size, and Ratfans will be pleased to hear that the 'A' glows red when it's engaged, just like you're used to.

Most importantly then, how does it sound? Well, like a Rat! The Distortion control winds in that familiar fuzzy-edged gain, and the volume governs your overall output, but the key to the Rat's personality really lies in the filter control. All the way to the left with maximum clipping gives you the full frequency range, and it's here that you'll find the airy presence and grind that helps achieve the little rodent's distinctive sound. It's an aggressive sweep, and you can smooth things out easily by backing off the gain and turning the filter to the right to roll off the highs.

The filter also helps if you want to start stacking with other drives or into your amp's distortion channel, bolstering your sustain à la the original Dave G, but without careering too far into 'grunge' mode.

It's been a little while coming, and surely the sight of other brands producing Rat-like mini-pedals has lured Pro Co out of hiding, but for $200, why not catch a genuine Rat that you'll be able to fit on even the most cramped of 'boards?

▶ VERDICT

There are Rat variants everywhere you look these days, but for well under 100 bucks, this wee fella will give you some original rodent magic without taking up too much space on your pedalboard.

▶ PROS

- Classic Rat 2 hard-clipping distortion.
- A versatile distortion.
- It's nice and compact.

▶ CONS

- No room for a battery.

▶ CONTACT

CMI MUSIC & AUDIO
Ph: (03) 9315 2244
Web: cmi.com.au

Blackstar Dept. 10 Boost

HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE DOES A VALVE MAKE? LET'S FIND OUT... REVIEW BY **ROB LAING**.

RRP: $369

To be frank, Blackstar's Dept. 10 Dual Drive and Distortion preamp pedals dazzled us; receiving a coveted Platinum award in TG352. Those valve-driven dual-switch units offered four-voices and onboard editable cab modelling for a comprehensive and flexible backline on your 'board.

Their smaller sibling is packing the same ECC83 tube but it could easily be overshadowed by the features of the larger duo. In serving a different player need it places itself in a much more crowded marketplace; there are a wealth of boosts and overdrives out there. So can this little Blackstar pedal shine?

It needs to be highlighted that all three Dept.10 pedals use a full-voltage dual-triode valve with internal circuitry running to over 250VDC, to help the valve reach its operating range, just like a full valve amp. And yet they are powered by a 9V PSU that runs at 500MA. There's one included here but if you're adding this to your pedalboard's power supply it's worth keeping in mind that you'll need one capable of powering a pedal at that higher milliamp rating.

So there's serious power under this steel little hood; this is a valve being run as it should. And protected by a metal roll bar. The controls here are simple; Boost, High and Low. The latter two controls use James-Baxandall passive tone circuitry that provides an organically gradual sweep. The boost adds smooth sustain and fatness to a Strat bridge pickup set low at around eight o'clock, and its breadth and presence in your tone really does feel and sound like a tube amp rather than the approximation some boosts can.

Even at higher levels, this quickly finds a home as a natural tube-driven extension of your amp or pedal gain stages. Its quality makes it a go-to boost for a wide variety of rigs, and would even make a great bedfellow to push either of the Dual units.

▶ VERDICT

The Boost's amp-flattering quality makes it a viable option for a wide range of setups, and it's sure to complement the other pedals in the Dept. 10 series.

▶ PROS

- Adds tube-like warmth to your sound.
- Powerful tone-shaping from Low and High controls.
- Solid build.

▶ CONS

- Just remember it has a high current draw and source your pedalboard power supply accordingly.

▶ CONTACT

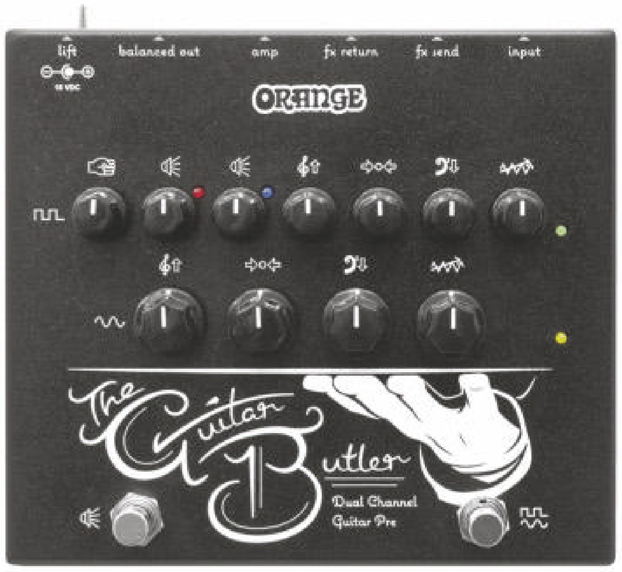
CMI MUSIC & AUDIO
Ph: (03) 9315 2244
Web: cmi.com.au

Orange The Guitar Butler

"YOUR TONE IS SERVED," SAYS ORANGE AS THE RENOWNED BRITISH AMP BUILDER PRESENTS A JUICY NEW PREAMP.

REVIEW BY **NICK GUPPY**.

RRP: $699



Orange has been turning out consistently great-sounding and innovative products for over 50 years, with a history that goes back to the early days of British blues and rock. Back then, the emphasis was on big, heavy 100-watt heads and 4x12 cabinets. Today, things have changed and many guitarists choose pedals to shape their sound, using amplification purely for making things louder. Consequently, self-contained preamps are increasingly popular and Orange has just released the new Guitar Butler, following on from its popular Bass Butler preamp introduced a couple of years ago.

The Guitar Butler is a full Orange front-end, squeezed into a compact, pedalboard-friendly enclosure and built to Orange's typically high standards. Inside the alloy box the electronics are all held on one large circuit board, excluding switches and sockets, which are directly mounted to the box and neatly hand-wired into the circuit. The dimensions make it an easy fit on most freestanding pedalboards, with rear-mounted sockets to keep wiring neat. Power comes from an 18-volt DC wall wart, so if you want to use a multi-outlet power supply then make sure it has this option.

The Guitar Butler features footswitchable Clean and Overdrive channels, both with gain controls and a passive three-band EQ. The Overdrive channel also includes a Presence control and two footswitchable master volumes, so you can pre-set one level for rhythm and a louder one for lead. On the back panel, there's a buffered series effects loop, an amp output on mono jack, and a balanced output on XLR, with a ground lift and cabinet simulation.

We tried out The Guitar Butler with a valve head and a 2x12 Celestion V30-loaded cab. Right from the start, the Clean channel added an expansive vintage-voiced tonality that enhanced single coils and humbuckers, while the JFET-powered lead channel has plenty of overdrive to cater for any taste, from vintage blues to full-on Britpop roar, very typical of the 'Orange sound'. Hiss and hum levels are impressively low, making this ideal for recording as well as live use.

▶ VERDICT

Aimed at pro players and serious amateurs, Orange's Guitar Butler seems to tick all the boxes. If you're looking for a pedalboard-friendly preamp that gives you a wide range of classic British tone at a reasonable price, The Guitar Butler should be top of your list.

▶ PROS

- Great range of clean and overdrive sounds.
- The excellent low-noise performance is ideal for recording purposes.

▶ CONS

- The 18-colt DC power requirement may need some thought when integrating the Guitar Butler into a pedalboard with a multi-outlet power supply.

▶ CONTACT

AUSTRALIS MUSIC GROUP
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D'Addario Nexxus 360 Rechargeable Tuner

ANOTHER ENVELOPE-PUSHING GEM IN THE TUNING TECH BOOM. REVIEW BY **JIMMY LESLIE**.

RRP: $59.99

Tuning technology remains one of the bright lights in the guitar gear arena, especially on the purely acoustic side, where clip-on tuners rule the roost. D'Addario is always pushing the envelope and has achieved another breakthrough with the Nexxus 360, its first tuner to use a rechargeable lithium battery. Other features include full 360-degree rotation, a flexible pivot point, and a brilliant, bright and colourful LED screen.

The Nexxus 360 costs a bit more than similar tuners, but consider that a pair of Duracell lithium coin button batteries runs about six bucks online (and more in a store), and you'll start to realise how much money it can save over the long haul. The Nexxus comes with a USB cable, powers up quickly, and delivers about 24 hours of use on a full charge. That's about the same amount of running time you'll get from a three-volt lithium battery.

The Nexxus is absolutely awesome around home. When it runs out, simply plug it into a USB power hub for a spell and you're back in business. It's a fine feeling to simply leave it on all the time without worry about drainage. In that regard, the tuner becomes an excellent note-recognition device, helping to decipher the fretboard at every turn. That's particularly handy when playing in open tunings, where the fretboard becomes much more mysterious.

On the road, well, the Nexxus 360 is simply one more thing in the electronic arsenal to be addressed at every stop, right along with your computer/iOS device, headphones/powered speaker, and of course, whatever vape or e-cigarette device you're toting. But it's sure nice not to worry about the battery failing at a critical moment, especially if you didn't have a chance to stop and plonk down the ducats for backups. If the Nexxus runs out of juice, simply use a phone adaptor and plug it into your pedalboard power for a refill. By the way, a little light indicates the level on power-up to help you know when the tuner needs a charge.

What's drawing power is the Nexxus 360's fantastically illuminated, crystal-clear, full-color LED screen. It works chromatically, with a semi-circle of 15 little LEDs surrounding a large note letter readout in the middle. Red on either side means very sharp or flat, yellow is closer, and three greens at the top mean you're good to go. Display and functionality are fabulous.

The Nexxus 360 is fast, accurate and right to the point without bouncing all around, making it a cinch to home in on the desired pitch. Calibration can be adjusted via the two little buttons on either side of the power button, and those are the only three controls – nice and simple. When you hit and hold either the up or down button, calibration adjusts by as many cents as flash by, and upon release, three numbers flash sequentially to show where it landed, such as 4-4-0. The tuner has a range of 415 to 465 Hz.

The size and style of this tuner is much appreciated. Having tons of experience with myriad clip-on-style tuners, I can see why D'Addario wound up with this here and now. Some older headstock tuners are large and indiscreet, and while micro-tuners are super stealthy, they're more difficult to read, and easy to misplace. The Nexxus 360 is a Goldilocks size – not too large or small, and just right for the job at hand. The clamp is nice and tight, and the tuner's omnidirectional capability and flexible fulcrum make it easy to find the best position for the player without distracting onlookers from the real show.

What the airlines say about those coin batteries is true: I used to keep a bunch of them in a plastic bag, with plastic wrap interwoven for separation. Lo and behold, one day when two or more of them must have been in contact, the bag spontaneously combusted! Luckily, I happened to be looking in that direction as the adjacent wooden CD storage tower started to smoulder. This editor is all for looking back on single-use battery power as a bygone age.

VERDICT

The size is right, the bright display is precise, the plastic casing feels durable, and the über-adjustable screen facilitates the line of sight. Rechargeability is convenient, saves money and waste, and is much safer.

PROS

- Rechargeable is economical and less wasteful.
- Fabulous display is fast and accurate.
- Fantastic flexibility.

CONS

- Only that a troubadour must remember to keep it handy and charge regularly along with other devices on the road.

CONTACT

D'ADDARIO
Ph: (03) 8761 6293
Web: daddario.com.au

Vox Bobcat S66 +V90 with Bigsby

RRP: $2,599 (S66) $2,999 (V90)

NO SOONER HAD WE FINISHED TESTING VOX'S BOBCATS IN 2021, AND THERE'S NOW A PAIR WITH BIGSBY VIBRATOS AND A MOODIER VIBE. REVIEW BY **DAVE BURRLUCK**.

Outwardly, the contemporary Vox Bobcat (based on the Italian-made Vox original from the mid-60s) looks like any other Gibson thinline clone. But, as we discovered back in issue 469, it's a different take on that hallowed design. It retains the 416mm (16.38-inch) width of that classic style, but the scale length is increased to 635mm (25-inch) and the weight-relieved centre block swaps to spruce, narrower under the pickups and fuller widthed from the tune-o-matic bridge to the base and at the neck joint.

While that helped keep those original versions around the 3.2-kilogram mark, the addition of a Bigsby only marginally ups the weight and slightly changes the seated balance. The craft is faultless, if a little generic, with both bodies fully bound, including the f-holes – likewise, with the Indonesian ebony fingerboards and the classic-style headstocks.

The other differences are purely cosmetic: both colours come with flashier deeply coloured abalone-like block inlays and headstock logos, while the pickup covers and pickguards change from bright white to black. The Sapphire Blue finish retains the chromed hardware – the Bigsby in its traditional polished-aluminium finish – although the neat knurled aluminium knobs change to a black finish. On the Jet Black version all the hardware, including the Bigsby, change to black.

The three single coils of the S66

make for quite the semi. There's a volume control for each pickup, and a master tone, but only a three-way toggle pickup selector. In effect, it functions like a two-pickup guitar and you just roll in the middle pickup to any of the switch selections. Cross a Strat with an ES-335 and you get the picture. There are some cool sounds and lovely sparkle with the middle pickup added or more direct without. The addition of the Bigsby adds perfect shimmer – and if you live for blues or rockabilly, you'll be at home.

The V90 appears more standard, except the pickups feature rod magnets rather than the usual adjustable poles of the soapbar style. It's a more direct drive, too; it has a slightly brighter, more percussive note attack married with a little more width. Like the S66 it really suits the Bigsby addition.

VERDICT

These might look like anyone else's thinline clones, but it's the sounds that give them their own place. Our only quandary is which one we prefer!

PROS

- Lightweight.
- Very tidy build, pickup style and voicing.

CONS

- No hum-cancelling in mixed pickup positions.
- Plenty of competition in style, often at trimmer prices.

CONTACT

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Taylor American Dream AD27e Flametop

THE FLAMETOP TAKES A GIANT STEP AWAY FROM TRADITIONAL TAYLOR TURF, VENTURING FURTHER TO A PLACE THAT'S DOWNRIGHT FUNKY AND DOWN HOME ON THE BACK PORCH. REVIEW BY **JIMMY LESLIE**.

RRP: $3,199

The least Taylor-sounding guitar you've heard to date – that's how Taylor presented the AD27e Flametop to this writer before sending a review unit, and connecting us with designer Andy Powers for a thorough explanation of his latest creation. Needless to say we were intrigued.

So what exactly is this new outlier? The AD27e Flametop joins the American Dream team, which Powers describes as "the cup of black coffee of guitars. 'Just get the job done.'" The worker-bee line was introduced at the height of Covid's first wave, in the summer of 2020 via the original AD27e, which featured a Grand Pacific body made of solid sapele back and sides with a mahogany top. The primary difference here is right in the title. "Flametop" refers to the flame maple used for the top, back and sides. Right off the bat this isn't only unlike any other Taylor, it's also very unusual for an acoustic guitar.

"Maple isn't typically used as a topwood because it has a high damping factor, meaning it responds kind of slowly and tends to sluff off some of the delicate frequency response," Powers explains. "Normally that kills the guitar, and a maple top is surely not the choice for a high-fidelity instrument, but in this case I'm after a dustier sound. In the context of V-Class bracing, the rules start changing. You can adapt the architecture to allow a very different kind of response. 'Flaws,' such as where the intonation starts to fall off and the resonance becomes too unpredictable, can be re-thought. You can turn a hindrance into a help."

The Flametop definitely has a distinctive sound. The tone is dry and on the dark side, especially for a Taylor. There aren't a lot of complex overtones but rather a flat, fundamental tone focused squarely in the middle range. The Flametop comes equipped with D'Addario Nickel Bronze strings, which are a significant factor in this earthy-sounding equation. Fitting for the Flametop, they are designed to sound less brilliantly metallic, letting the wood speak for itself. The guitar is also equipped with Taylor ES2 electronics. To my ears, the Flametop sounded a tad lighter and more airy when amplified. I simply rolled the treble back a bit on the guitar.

Somehow, the AD27e Flametop makes you play differently. The neck profile is pretty much modern standard stuff, so it doesn't seem to be coming from there, although it's worth mentioning that the neck is made of eco-friendly farmed eucalyptus, which Powers describes as "more akin to rosewood than ebony." The Nickel Bronze strings are surely another factor. They feel and sound worn-in, even when they're brand-new, and I feel like they slow me down on the neck.

But there's more to it than that: It's the maple top's response that just makes you want to bang away! The Flametop begs to be strummed aggressively with a thick pick, cowboy-style. It's a no-frills, broken-in and practically road-worn tone that lends authenticity to blues. When I mentioned the Flametop feeling like some new version of a pawnshop prize, Powers replied, "That's it," and ran with another analogy.

"I like driving an old pickup truck, so I got a Ford from the '50s, and it's fun to drive around, but it's also a handful," he says. "You immediately want to put in disc brakes, power steering and a smoother transmission. Many guitars I could seek out to create a sound similar to the Flametop are not reliable or comfortable to play. They have poor action, intonation and a host of other issues. I wanted to create a sound that I can't find in any other new guitar, along with modern performance and reliability.

So while the AD27e Flametop has that pawnshop dreadnought appeal, it's also got modern tuners, an accurate fretboard with excellent action and awesome intonation. The sonority of the sound, well, that's a different flavour, and I kind of like it."

Powers' point is well taken, and it played out over time. The more familiar I became with the Flametop, the more the whole concept came into focus. The weathered look of its shaded edgeburst woodsmoke finish and satin sheen perfectly matches the dusky, gritty tone. Powers had already taken the Taylor sound into new territory with the original Grand Pacific, the first Taylor designed to deliver a warmer sound via a classic, soft-shouldered-dreadnought body style reminiscent of a Gibson J-45 miked-up in a Nashville studio. But that's still a high-fidelity instrument made for discerning players.

Then came the more workman-like version in the form of the original American Dream, the AD27e, with its more fundamental tone. The Flametop takes another giant step away from traditional Taylor turf, venturing further to a place that's downright funky and down home on the back porch.

For a second opinion, I ran it past a pair of trusted ears belonging to the owner of the local recording studio. He's a good-ol' southern boy who typically eschews Taylor guitars on account of them being "too bright." He took one solid strum of the Flametop and proclaimed, "That's my favorite Taylor ever."

VERDICT

The more familiar I became with the Flametop, the more the whole concept came into focus. The weathered look of its shaded edgeburst woodsmoke finish and satin sheen perfectly matches the dusky, gritty tone.

PROS

- Hearty, earthy tone with harnessed highs.
- Smokey smooth look and feel.
- A well-crafted workhorse that can take a wallop.

CONS

- Musicians should understand this model is designed with a less-vibrant, more lo-fi tone and duller string action, and is aimed at traditionally non-Taylor players.

CONTACT

TAYLOR GUITARS
Web: taylorguitars.com

RRP: $1,099

Electro-Harmonix Dirt Road Special

AUTHENTIC TUBE-LIKE RESPONSE AND FEEL THAT ALMOST MAKES YOU FORGET IT'S A SOLID-STATE AMP. REVIEW BY **PAUL RIARIO**.

Solid state amps tend to fall into two categories: your meat-and-potatoes "clean and dirty with reverb" bundles and "everything but the kitchen sink" ones with amp and effects modelling. I have no problem using either type as of late because, frankly, solid state amplification has come a long way from some of the sterile- and anaemic-sounding tubeless amps of yore.

Case in point: Electro-Harmonix's brand-new Dirt Road Special isn't an exact reissue of the late-'70s "Mike Matthews Dirt Road Special" – a rare 25-watt solid state combo with Electro-Harmonix's Small Stone phaser circuit built in – but rather, a capable 1x12 combo that builds upon the original's design by bumping the power up to 40 watts and replacing the phaser with four built-in reverbs pulled from EHX's Holy Grail Max pedal instead, making it a far more practical and gig-worthy amp. But more importantly, its updated circuitry provides a more authentic tube-like response and feel that may almost make you forget it's a solid state amp.

The boxy Dirt Road Special may look somewhat small, but don't be fooled; this combo gets plenty loud, thanks to its open-back design and custom-voiced Electro-Harmonix 12-inch speaker that's rated at 75 watts. It's also pleasantly portable and feels much lighter than its 30-pound readout. Its top-panel controls include Volume, Tone (bass/treble frequency response), Bite (gain and treble frequency response), Reverb (reverb volume) along with a rotary reverb-type selector (Spring, Hall, Plate and Reverse) and Time (adjusts the reverb's decay time). The amp also includes an on/off footswitch for the reverb.

I really thought the Dirt Road Special would mostly be a "clean machine" – and it certainly does that – despite the amp's figurative name that suggests otherwise. To get spotlessly clean largely depends on where you set the Volume knob, and then, how you balance the interactive dance between the Tone and Bite controls. For this, Volume can be taken up to three while leaving the Tone knob at high noon and setting the Bite control slightly before that for fullness and clarity.

Here, the DRS is great for hearing the sparkle of your single-coil pickups and the roundness of humbucker-equipped guitars. It's also where your time-based and modulated effects receive proper representation in use as a solid pedal platform. But to find that "Dirt Road," those same controls need to become a matter of addition and subtraction. As you increase Bite along with Volume, more gravelly grind emerges with a sharpened high-end attack, which means you'll need to dial back Tone to supplant the gain and higher treble frequency response of Bite in order to bring forth more plump low-end.

At peak volumes, I'm not sure I'd call the sound overdriven, but depending on how hard you dig in, it reminds me of the stinging, pointed drive that screamed from Pete Townshend's super-loud HiWatt stacks, and easing up on your guitar's volume control will curb that pummelling tone. Simply put, it's a gritty "loud-clean" with a noticeable degree of warmth, and finding that sweet spot mix between those controls makes the Dirt Road Special convincingly react much like a tube amp.

If you love 'verb, you'll appreciate the built-in selection of onboard reverbs in the DRS. What's really useful is having the Time knob for setting generous or narrower decay times for each of its voluminous reverb types. Many players will find the Spring and Hall reverbs to be handy in most live situations for their organic shimmer. Plate is the most immense of the four, and maxing out the decay time stirs up a splashy tidal wave of reverb wash that seems to endlessly linger. Reverse is more of a novelty, but its delayed backward response can make for some fun and interesting spatial textures if you decide to commit it to tape.

VERDICT

As a solid state powerhouse with four built-in reverbs, the blistering EHX Dirt Road Special delivers sparkling cleans or stingi ng drive with tube-like gusto.

PROS

- Built-in selection of onboard reverbs in the DRS.
- This thing gets loud.

CONS

- Reverse is more of a novelty.

CONTACT

VIBE MUSIC
Web: vibemusic.com.au

Epiphone 1961 Les Paul SG Standard

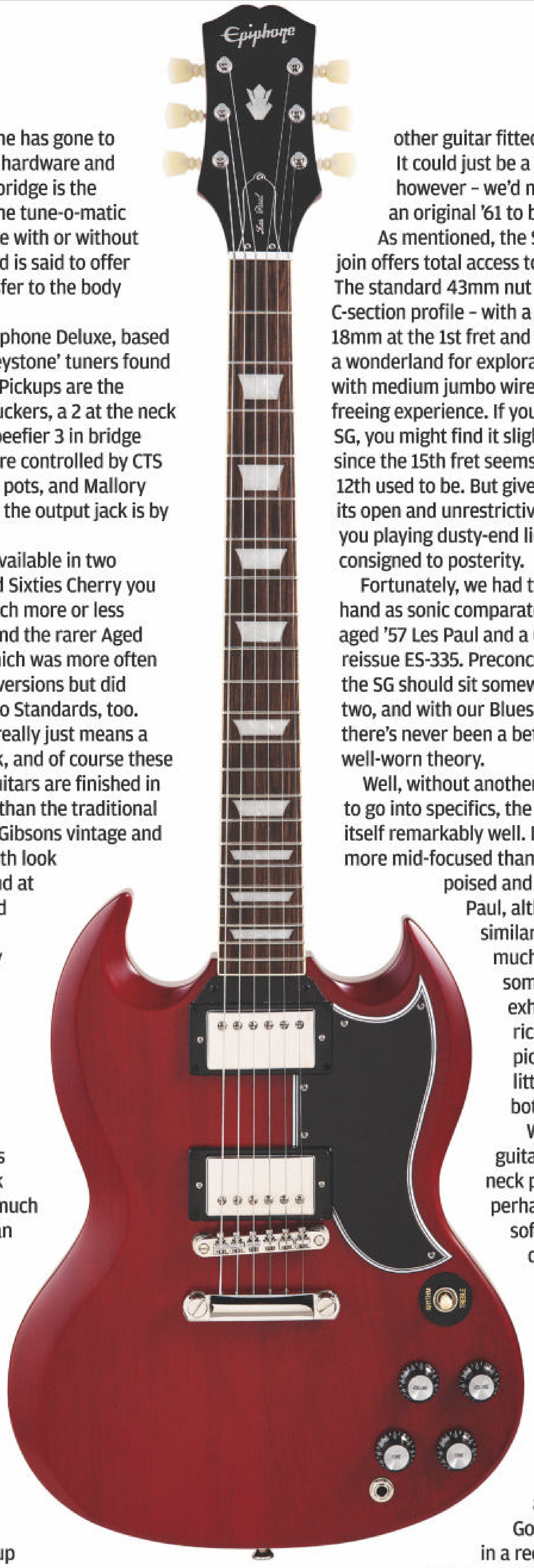
ANOTHER NEW EPIPHONE MODEL ENTERS THE FRAY, PROMISING THE LOOKS, SOUND AND PLAYABILITY OF ITS USA GIBSON COUSIN AT A FRACTION OF THE PRICE.

RRP: $1,999

REVIEW BY **NEVILLE MARTEN**.

The Gibson SG, perhaps rather like Fender's Jazzmaster, the Rickenbacker 330 or even Gretsch's 6120, is one of those guitars that most of us think, "I really should get one of those." Yet as often than not these fine instruments stay languishing on the shelf in favour of another Strat, Tele or Les Paul. Well, if Epiphone's recent form continues with this incarnation of the mother brand's pointy-horned wonder, perhaps now might be the time for that to change.

The SG's entry to the market was somewhat controversial, since initially it bore Les Paul's



moniker, but the legendary musician, electronics genius and inventor didn't like the guitar. He thought it was too flimsy and demanded Gibson remove his name. Hence the birth of the 'Solid Guitar' (SG) in 1961. But by the time of Les's request quite a few 'SG' Les Pauls had been shipped and the model's rarity has made it sought after and collectible.

Now, the Epiphone-badged remake, at just $2,000, including a brown 'Lifton' style case, brings the model's many charms to the masses at a fraction of the cost of an original, or even a Gibson Custom Shop version.

Utilising identical electronics and hardware to the outgoing guitar, the SG-style Les Paul's looks (we'll simply call it SG from now on) were so radically different that it was to all intents and purposes a completely different instrument. Gibson created a striking, heavily chamfered 31mm (1.25-inch) mahogany body and mated it to a mahogany neck that joined the body at the last of its 22 frets.

On the originals, the body and neck were each one piece of Honduran mahogany, now a restricted species, so our Epiphone has a two-piece body of unspecified mahogany, while the neck is a single piece of the same. The fingerboard is Indian laurel, a most attractive rosewood alternative and rather nicer than the indifferent 'ginger' stuff so often found on instruments these days.

Les did have a point about the SG's sturdiness, or lack of it. Even though the guitar features a long tenon that runs deep into the body, the routing for the neck pickup removes much of it, leaving the instrument vulnerable at that point – just as it is at the headstock, that other notorious danger area. However, this very lightness of construction made it a stunningly playable guitar, and lent it a set of tones quite distinct from that of its heftier forbear.

The SG Standard also carried over the bound 22-fret fingerboard with trapezoid inlays in faux pearl, just as we find here. Epiphone has retained the beautifully dimensioned medium C-profile neck, and our guitar is also faithful to the original with its small pickguard – later '60s versions, such as Angus Young's, featured the larger one that covered much of the body and offered cheaper production since the pickups were mounted on it.

Due to the guitar's pointed top horn it was not practical to mount the strap button there, so instead we find it on the back, by the heel. This has always made the guitar's balance on a strap something of a compromise and, with the unusual 22nd-fret neck join, helped to push the fingerboard off to the player's left (on right-handed instruments). However, we've never heard Angus, Pete Townshend, Eric Clapton or any other famous SG player complain about it; they simply worked around the problem and got on with playing.

As we've seen with several of the Epiphones we've looked at recently – notably the superb Joe Bonamassa 'Lazarus' Les Paul and BB King 'Lucille' models – Epiphone has gone to town on the SG's hardware and electronics. Our bridge is the excellent LockTone tune-o-matic that stays in place with or without string tension and is said to offer better tone transfer to the body and pickups.

Tuners are Epiphone Deluxe, based on the Kluson 'keystone' tuners found on the originals. Pickups are the excellent Burstbuckers, a 2 at the neck and the slightly beefier 3 in bridge position. These are controlled by CTS tone and volume pots, and Mallory capacitors, while the output jack is by Switchcraft.

The guitar is available in two colours: the Aged Sixties Cherry you see here and which more or less typifies the SG; and the rarer Aged Classic White, which was more often seen on Custom versions but did make its way onto Standards, too. The term 'aged' really just means a slightly matt look, and of course these Chinese-made guitars are finished in polyester rather than the traditional nitrocellulose of Gibsons vintage and modern. They both look great, though, and at this price it would be unfair to get picky – especially when you factor in the premium hardware and electronics.

A couple of final points. The SG carries the excellent '60s 'small' headstock design that's so much more elegant than the previous rather lumpy outline. All plastic ware is black, and the bell-style truss rod features the famous 'Les Paul' script. One tiny thing, though: the pickup surrounds' end pieces (where the mounting and height adjustment screws sit) seem a touch wider than on original vintage SGs of the era and almost every other guitar fitted with humbuckers. It could just be a perceived difference, however – we'd need to take a ruler to an original '61 to be sure.

As mentioned, the SG's 22nd-fret neck join offers total access to the fingerboard. The standard 43mm nut width and medium C-section profile – with a depth of just over 18mm at the 1st fret and 20mm at the 12th – is a wonderland for exploration. Perfectly fretted with medium jumbo wire, it's a completely freeing experience. If you've never played an SG, you might find it slightly daunting at first since the 15th fret seems to be where the 12th used to be. But give it a few minutes and its open and unrestrictive nature will have you playing dusty-end licks you'd long since consigned to posterity.

Fortunately, we had two great guitars on hand as sonic comparators: a Tom Murphy aged '57 Les Paul and a Custom Shop '63 reissue ES-335. Preconceptions tell us that the SG should sit somewhere between the two, and with our Blues Junior warmed up there's never been a better time to test the well-worn theory.

Well, without another two pages available to go into specifics, the Epiphone acquits itself remarkably well. It's a little louder and more mid-focused than the ES-335 but not as poised and balanced as the Les Paul, although it does share similarities. Neither has much of the 'honk' that some humbucking guitars exhibit, but both offer rich, clear sounds on any pickup setting – the SG a little more 'quacky' with both Burstbuckers on.

While none of the guitars are flabby in the neck position, the Epiphone perhaps comes out as the softest. Whether such comparisons have any merit at all, who knows? All we can say with some certainty is that it would take a vampire bat or a barn owl (the two animals with the best hearing according to Dr Google) to separate them in a recording or stage mix.

That said, things we don't spot at review volume can, of course, materialise when playing at stage levels. Overall, though, Epiphone's latest solidbody is unlikely to disappoint.

VERDICT

At the risk of sounding like the record's stuck, Epiphone has nailed it again. It represents phenomenal value, plays extremely well and stands up sonically to a pair of Gibsons that together outrank it a dozen-fold, price-wise.

PROS

- Looks, finish, playability, value and Gibson SG attitude.
- Another budget guitar from Epiphone that gives Custom Shop Gibsons a run for their money.

CONS

- Some might struggle with balance and the offset neck position.
- The pickup rings seem slightly oversized.

CONTACT

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HOW TO MAKE IT AS A PRO GUITARIST: SIX TIPS FROM AN INDUSTRY VETERAN

SEASONED SESSION PLAYER **DAN MAHER** SHARES HIS WISDOM ON PLAYING THE GUITAR FOR A LIVING.

PHOTO BY **HENRIK SORENSEN**.

While there's no single path to being a professional session guitarist, there are certainly a few things you can do to put yourself on the right path. Here are six tips I wish I'd been given when I was starting out.

1. GET STUFF

Get yourself an interface, speakers/headphones, mic and DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) and learn how to use them. Gone are the days of resident studio musicians; it's now possible to produce high-quality tracks in your bedroom with a modest setup. GarageBand comes stock on Macs, and most budget interfaces come with free versions of programs like Ableton Lite. YouTube has a plethora of tutorials to help you get the most out of your software.

2. SERVE THE MUSIC, NOT YOUR EGO

No matter what, the focus should always be to make the music feel good. If you're creating an original part, assess what the song needs, guitar-wise – and do that! It's great to have chops, but having the maturity to use them sparingly is more impressive than overplaying. Treat the music with care and attention to detail and you'll go far.

3. BE VERSATILE

Broaden your skill set to bring more to the table. Learn to read notation in addition to developing your ears. Having secondary instruments like banjo and ukulele at your disposal never hurts, either. Listen to as many styles as possible so that when a producer (or online client) tells you, "This track needs a Freddie Green chonk" or a "Jeff Beck vibe," you'll know exactly what they're after and will have the sensibility to execute these styles authentically. This also applies to the sounds you choose.

4. SUPPORT THE VOCAL

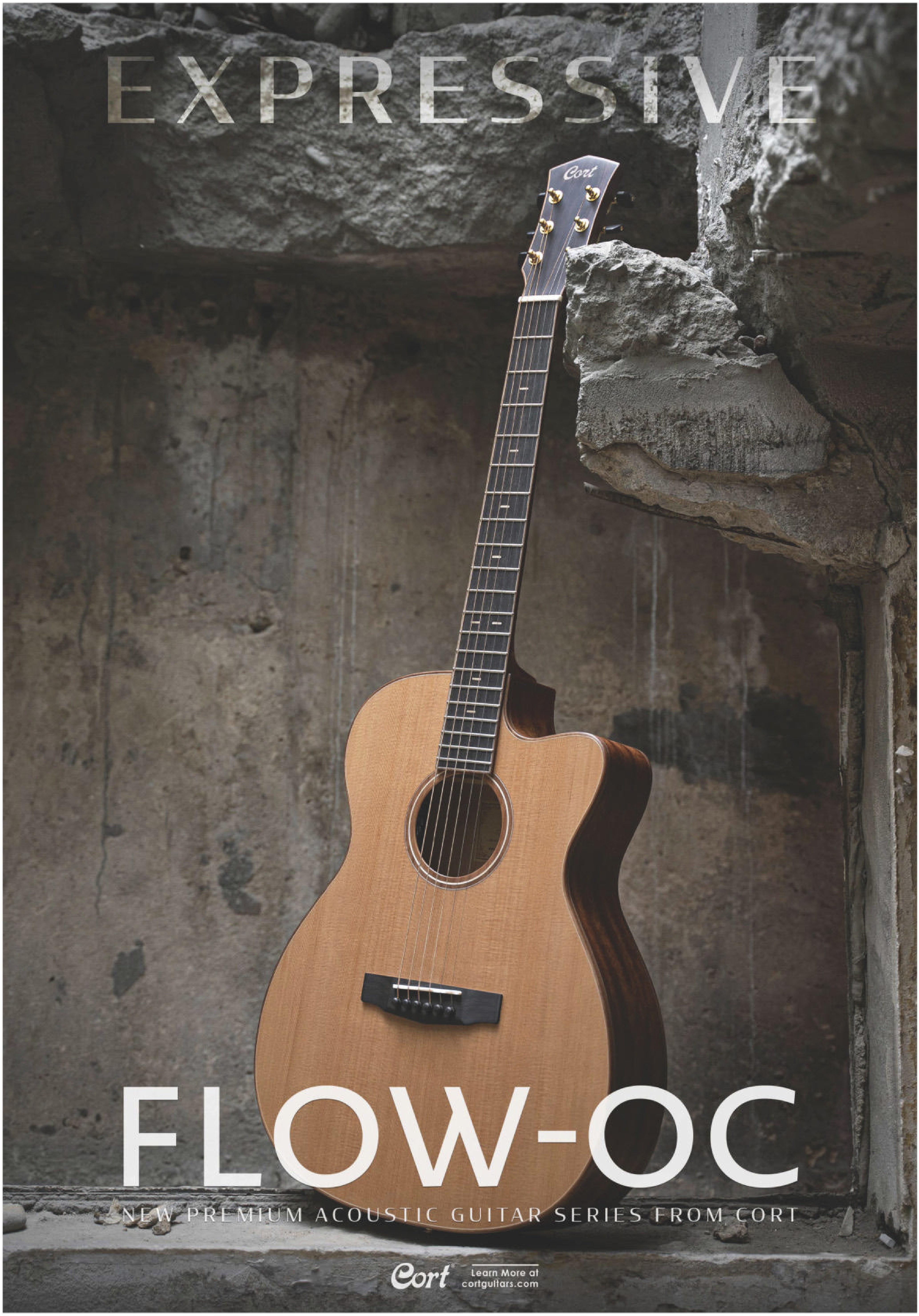
Whether you're recording or playing live behind an artist, it's important to be a strong support for the vocal. The ability to play dynamically – with sensibility, solid timing and confidence – is paramount. Music is rarely about us as individuals; it's about the overall sonic experience we're giving the listener.

5. GET CLIENTS

In order to get the ball rolling, you need to get your name out there from as many angles as possible, especially if you don't have a pre-existing network of clients. Start by making a website and Soundcloud profile (and link them!), then sign up to multiple freelancer sites such as Craigslist, Fiverr and Starnow. Upload some guitar loops/demos to give prospective clients a feel for your sound and playing. It's important to have examples of your work available when people search your name.

6. BE SOCIAL

Social media is an incredibly powerful tool for networking and promoting your work. However, it's important to not let it take precedence over honing your craft and becoming a quality player. Nobody cares about your 10,000 followers if you can't play to a click. Your online presence will be of greater value and authenticity if it's a reflection of your work as an artist, rather than your image alone.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